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MAY 1957

ALL STORIES
NEW AND
COMPLETE

William L. Hamling
Editor

Stories

THE HORDE FROM INFINITY

(Complete Novel—20,000 words)..... by Dwight V. Swain..... 6

TWELVE HOURS TO BLOW!

(Short Story—6,000 words)..... by Robert Silverberg..... 66

THE MAN FROM SPACE

(Short Story—5,600 words)..... by Robert Moore Williams.... 82

PAUSE IN BATTLE

(Short Story—1,800 words)..... by Ivor Jorgensen..... 96

THE PINK PUPPY DOG

(Short Story—3,300 words)..... by Mork Reinsberg..... 100

THE LAST KILLER

(Short Story—3,000 words)..... by Randall Gorrett..... 110

Features

THE EDITORIAL 4

COSMIC PEN CLUB..... 122

CLOUD CHAMBER PHYSICS..... 80

LETTERS FROM THE READERS.... 126

SCIENTIFILM MARQUEE..... 118

BOOK-SUBSCRIPTION PAGE..... 130

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The Editorial.....

LOOKING at the lineup of cover stories (and cover paintings to go along with them) makes one fact stand out—this is proving to be a big year for both TALES and IMAGINATION readers. We don't have to mention this month's cover and novel because you've probably already enjoyed both—if not, start reading!—but a small glimpse into what's coming up should whet your appetite considerably.

TAKE the forthcoming June issue of IMAGINATION, our companion science fiction magazine. The cover painting is a terrific new job by Lloyd Rognan, around Alex Blade's great novel, THE SINISTER INVASION. Alex, as you know, has a habit of turning out top-notch action novels of the far starways, and this new one is no exception. Watch for the issue on sale March 26.

THE next issue of TALES—the July number—will feature what we believe is one of Malcolm Smith's finest cover paintings, illustrating Edmond Hamilton's thrilling novel, WORLD OF NEVER-MEN. The July TALES will hit the stands on April 25th, so don't be late getting your copy. (If you want it weeks earlier, turn to page 130 and send in your subscription. A darn good idea, and

you'll note a great NEW book bonus combination. The Van Vogt novel, EMPIRE OF THE ATOM, is a brand-new book! Here's your chance to get it absolutely free!)

SO watch for the coming issues —they'll bring you the best in science fiction!wlh



"Then after leaving the Earth's atmosphere and reaching an altitude of 1075 miles, the body has to make another terrific adjustment because you became weightless; dizziness and nausea will probably result. Then, there are other outer space hazards, you know—meteorites, cosmic rays. ."



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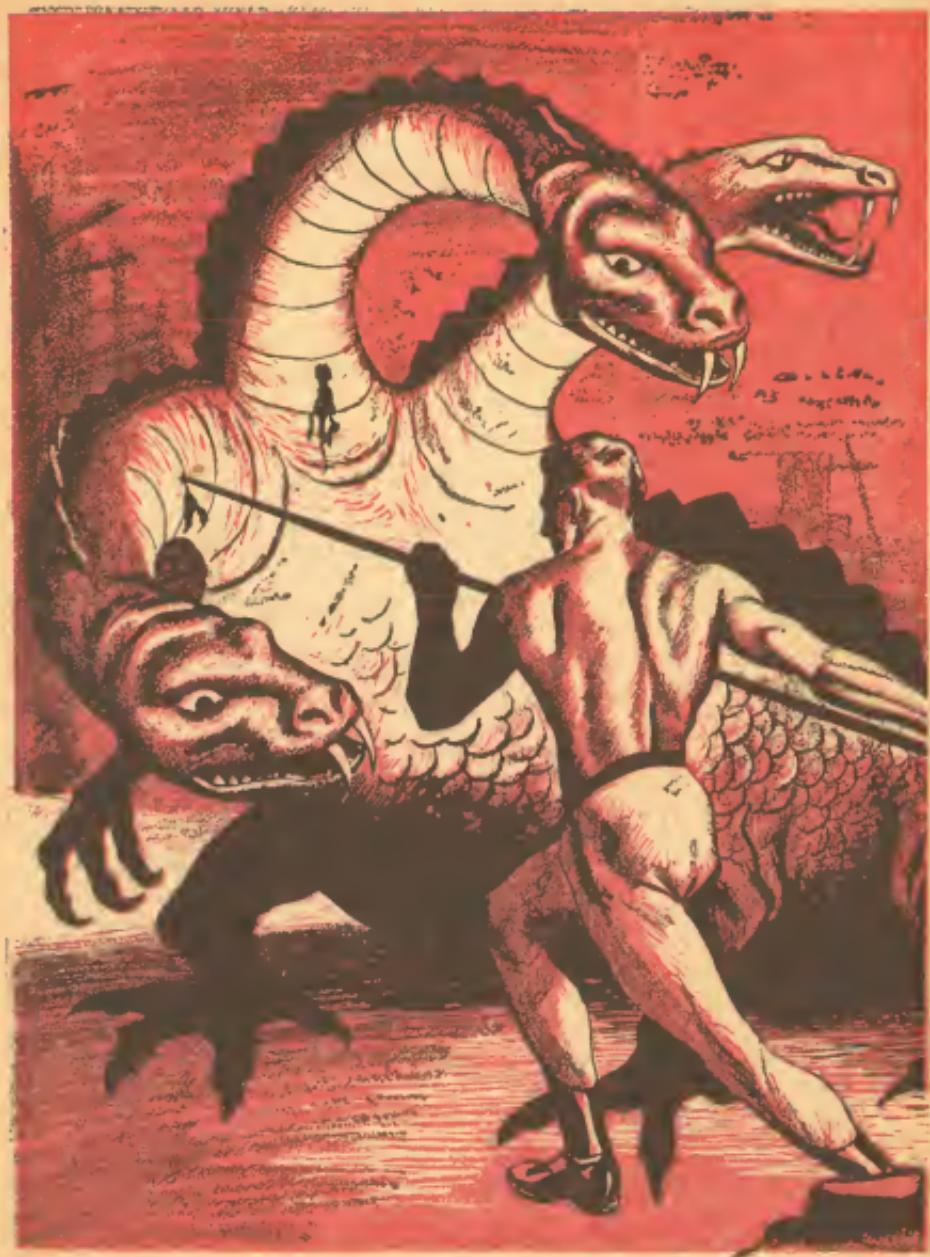
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It was one man against an alien legion;
it was Dave Rock's life in exchange for safety
to Earth and a hundred worlds. Thus he faced—

The Horde From Infinity

by

Dwight V. Swain

MEN CALLED THEM the Drossa.

The first creatures left Horla a shambles.

The second wrecked Bandjaran.

The third reduced Calak to a wilderness of shattered buildings and smoldering ruins and hollow-eyed, horror-struck, pain-racked beings, less men than panic, incar-



nate.

After that -- chaos. In less than three cycles the whole solar system sprawled half-paralyzed under the impact of its nightmare invaders, these monsters who appeared seemingly out of nowhere to ravage cities and desolate colonies. For the Federation, the issue ceased to center on whether or not to surrender. That stage had passed. The only question now was how to make terms fastest.

That is, assuming anyone could ascertain just who to make terms with.

And then, destiny moved David Rock onto the scene . . .

CHAPTER I

HE WAS LYING in his bunk the night the girl came, wondering whether he should be worried enough by the tone of Tom's last letter to make a break and run for Venus.

Only that hardly seemed too bright a prospect, considering how he stood with Security already.

Yet what other course was there? The highest authorities of the whole misbegotten Federation had joined ranks to give him this permanent assignment to a Gany-medan advance base compound. So they were hardly likely to grant him an exit permit now. Not with

his reputation, nor in the face of this Drossa trouble. Not when the best reason he could put forward for wanting to leave was worry over the tone of his younger brother's latest letter.

Especially considering that said brother was twenty-eight Earth years old and a certified free tech at Gordon Pennap's AI lab on Venus.

No, that wouldn't do. Not at all.

Frowning, Rock shifted in his bunk and tried to envision a different approach.

The sound caught his attention at the same instant.

Half-way, it seemed like a footstep, whispering through the night from somewhere outside the ver-Meer hut.

But only half-way, for it echoed too light for either the footgear or personnel that went with a Gany-medan advance base.

In spite of himself, Rock stiffened. And that was foolish, for this wasn't the old days of blood and trouble. He no longer lived on a world of lava lions and mutants, prowling renegades and FedGov agents, with sudden death lurking like a Chonya in every covert.

The sound came again -- closer, this time.

Rock rolled from the bunk in one lithe motion. Then, flat to the floor, he wormed to the half-open door-

way and peered out above the high protective sill.

More sound. Movement, flickering. A shadow, falling across the patch of light that spilled from the doorway.

Rock breathed in sharply.

Because the shadow was human and female; very definitely female.

And that was impossible.

Now a new sound drifted from the outer darkness. It took the form of a high, thin whine, under-shot with a deeper note -- guttural almost. Yet it was hard to analyze, for it rose and fell and varied, as if coming from a swiftly-moving source.

Rock frowned.

But before he could even think too much about it all, the female shadow twisted, quick and urgent, and moved towards the open doorway.

Noiseless, cat-footed, Rock came erect and drew back behind the door, eye to the crack below the hinge.

Outside, a pebble rattled. The shadow paused for an instant, just short of the hut's entrance. Then, ever so gently, the door swung back against Rock's shoulder.

Rock held his breath.

Fabric whispered on the door-facing. A slender shoulder moved into view, between Rock and the bunk.

Deftly, Rock heeled the door shut behind the intruder.

The other started to whirl.

But Rock moved faster. Like lightning, he caught a slim wrist with his right hand; clamped the left over his visitor's mouth.

An instant of convulsive struggle.

Rock wrenched back the wrist, twisting.

The struggles ceased. His prisoner stood rigid, pain-stiffened.

And -- beyond doubt, this was a woman. Even the strange cut of her costume could not conceal it. Her hair was soft against Rock's cheek, its fragrance almost more than he could bear.

Tight-lipped, thankful for his vocodor translation button that freed him from the barrier of divergent human tongues, he spoke into her ear: "I'll break your arm if you try anything. Understand?"

The silver-blonde hair brushed his cheek again as she nodded.

Rock moved his hand from her mouth to her throat. "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

A tremor ran through the girl. She began to shiver as with cold.

Rock dug in his fingers. "Answer me! Who are you?"

The shivering stopped. The girl spoke -- a ragged, raw-nerved whisper: "No! There is no time for questions. Stregor -- he has found out; already, the Tarad's

searching for us - -"

"Stregor - -? The Tarad?"

"There isn't time, I tell you!
Every second's precious - -"

ROCK FELT HIS TEMPER flaring. "We'll make time, then." He twisted the girl's wrist sharply. "I asked you a question: who are you?"

"They - - call me Narla."

"From where?"

"You - - I - - it is a place you never heard of."

"Is it?" Savagely, Rock tightened his fingers. "Or is this just something new Security's thought up - - a trick, a trap, a stall to keep me busy while something goes on outside here?"

"Please, please . . ." The girl called Narla was almost sobbing now. She writhed against Rock. "The Tarad will kill us, both of us, and so your brother will die also - -"

Rock went rigid. "My brother - -"

"Yes. Your brother Tom, who was on Venus. He sent me here to find you - -"

"He sent you - -?" Rock spun the girl around to face him. "Where is he? What's happened to him?"

"There is no time, I tell you!"

The tension in Narla's voice was beyond ignoring. Hysteria rang in it. Her blue eyes held the glassiness

of utter panic.

Rock's doubts ebbed. Pulling her to the nearest window, he peered past her, straining his eyes against the pitch-black of the Ganymedian night.

As he did so, far out in the darkness the high whine he'd heard earlier rose sharply. The under-note took on a new, throbbing vibration.

Narla tugged at his arm. "The lights! Quick! Put them out!"

Rock pivoted. With one slap at the master switch he plunged the entire hut into darkness.

Narla's hand found his. "Now - - out the back window! We don't dare chance the door!"

Half angry, half indecisive, Rock let her pull him after her. In seconds they were sliding through the casement; dropping to the barren ground outside.

"Along the wall, now . . ."

Together, they groped their way through the murk.

Only then, suddenly, a hush seemed to fall about them. Rock felt a quick, weird sense of isolation, as if he were suspended in some incredible limbo, beyond all time and space. Even the air hung breathless and unstirring.

It irked Rock, somehow. Belligerently, he started forward.

But Narla caught his arm; pulled him back. "No, no! It's the Ta-

rad - -"

The strange hush broke in the same instant. A sudden gust, more of energy than wind, stung sand against Rock's face.

Instinctively, he jerked back, deeper into the shadows, tight against the wall.

As he did so, a shape hurtled into view around the far corner of the building . . . a monstrous, ball-like thing of faintly glowing streamers. Racing at hurricane tempo, with bare inches to spare, it whipped past Rock and Narla . . . spun like a top for an instant at the other end of the hut . . . and then, changing course, disappeared from view behind the building.

Narla's eyes gleamed white-rimmed in the darkness. She clutched at Rock. "Now! Quick! Run - -"

She darted from the shadows as she spoke - - out away from the hut, into the spreading blackness of the compound.

Still not quite knowing why, Rock followed.

Surprisingly, she seemed to know where she was going; to have an ultimate destination. It turned out to be a desolate patch of rock-strewn sand and zanda prickers close to the equanatal barrier, where luminiscent markers glowed green in the darkness.

Rock caught her arm. "Watch it, girl! There's a force fence just

beyond those lights!"

"I know," she nodded. "This is your compound's edge."

"Then you also know there's no way out here," Rock retorted. "So" - - he gripped her wrist - - "let's have those explanations now."

A shudder ran through the girl. She threw a quick, fearful glance back over her shoulder.

"Well?" Rock prodded.

"There still isn't time. The Tarad - - it's semi-sentient, an energy weapon conceived for Stregor by his cursed Hak'kah cube. We must leave before it senses we're no longer at the place you sleep."

Rock shook his head stolidly. "Sorry. As I said before, there's no way out."

For the first time, now, the girl called Narla laughed - - soft, triumphant. "Oh, yes, there is! This way . . ."

AS SHE SPOKE, she caught his hand in hers and led him off along the compound's border, parallel to the glowing markers.

The way she took command somehow irritated Rock. He felt himself bridling. "Listen, you - -"

"Here." Narla paused now, still ignoring his words. "This is the place."

Rock followed her gesture; stiffened.

For in the spot she indicated,

perhaps three feet above the ground, the darkness somehow held a different quality . . . a roiling, swirling, black-velvet texture somehow at odds with the enveloping night around it. It was like a whirlpool in water, materially no different from its adjoining element, even while dynamically it held potential menace.

A chill ran through Rock as he stared at it.

Simultaneously, Narla moved forward, towards the maelstrom. "Hurry, David Rock. There is so little time - -"

She stepped up and out as she spoke, as if onto a high step; and now, for the first time, Rock noted that at this point the blackness of the whirlpool seemed to spill down in a cascade almost to the ground.

Incredibly, the blackness held the girl. She stood as if on air, a good foot above the ground.

Another step, and she was two feet up . . . within reaching distance of the vortex.

She half-turned; stretched out her hand. "Please, David! This thing - - it is a space-gate, a unit to carry you farther, faster, than you can even dream." Her voice broke. "Oh! If you only knew what risks Tom and I ran to reach it, focus it on this compound . . ."

She looked away, off towards the

hut.

Rock forced himself to pay her no heed. "Sorry, Narla. I still want explanations first."

Her eyes came back to him. She wrung her hands. "Don't you understand? Tom needs you! Isn't that enough?"

For the fraction of a second Rock hung hesitant.

Behind him, a strange, roaring sound boomed forth in the same instant.

Rock whirled.

A blinding, burgeoning ball of light met his eyes, back where his hut had been.

Simultaneously, off to one side, a small whirlwind full of glowing streamers spun into view.

Narla gave a small, choked, incoherent cry. Turning, she darted up the stairway of black light, plunged into the vortex at the top - - and vanished before Rock's very eyes.

Instinctively, he started after her.

Only then, on the far periphery of his vision, he saw the glowing whirlwind swerve towards him.

He stopped short; dived aside by reflex, far out from the invisible stairway.

Again the whirlwind veered. Like a spinning ball, it swept up the stair and into the strange, murky maelstrom at the top.

A split-second later, stair and

vortex alike vanished.

For a long, long moment, Rock stared incredulous at the spot where they had been. Then, brow furrowed, he got to his feet and walked slowly towards the compound's distant gate.

A dozen steps, and he was laughing wryly.

Before, he'd worried about Tom . . . wondered whether breaking out was called for.

Now he knew and, knowing, had no choice.

Though it cost him his life, he'd have to get to Venus!

CHAPTER II

THEY FOUND ROCK before the globe-ship was two cycles out.

He'd expected that. It didn't bother him.

The important thing was, they'd unloaded him at Sol City, Venus, for shipment back to Ganymede in irons.

If they could hold him.

With that in mind, he made his play bare minutes after the globe-ship landed.

They were after him almost before he hit the ramp. But he slammed past the hatch guard and raced for a speeder.

Its driver didn't even know what hit him. Jamming down the hand

lift, Rock spun the wheel round in one tight-synchronized motion. Cinders spurted smoke. The craft peeled off in a screaming arc, past sky-docks and cargo loaders and batteries of dazzling Forspark lights.

Ahead, the port lock loomed.

Rock ducked as the rig struck; glimpsed another guard's startled face as speeder smashed barrier.

Then the craft was through the gate -- out, away, fleeing. Ramping area and port fell far behind. Sol City, pride of all Venus, spread beneath Rock, dark now with night beneath its huge plastic bubble in spite of billowing carbon dioxide clouds above and myriad sparkling lights below.

And there, too, off to the left, lay the massive pile that was the Associated Independents' laboratory building . . . the place where Gordon Pennap had his quarters, the structure in which young Tom worked as a free tech.

Grim, tight-lipped, Rock swung the speeder towards the sprawling edifice.

But as he did so, the craft careened wildly. One front grav shifted sidewise, wrenched loose from its bracket when it hit the port lock.

Slowing the rig, Rock dropped it down to base level and set the controls for full automatic. Then,

shoving in lift and climb levers, he leaped out.

The speeder zoomed away into the gloom.

In the same instant, somewhere too close, a siren's shrill blast rent the night.

Rock made the shadows of the nearest cross-slot in three swift strides.

Now autotrans began to drone through their plastic conduits, racing out from every Security post and district center. Carriers roared up from a hundred landing-platforms, scanner beams spread to intermesh as they combed the blackness.

Rock laughed aloud; and ice-nerved, ruthless, reckless daring rang in the sound. Suddenly he felt better than he had in years. Cool and deliberate, aggressive, he moved on along the cross-slot.

It went that way clear to the moment when he came into direct view of the big AI building.

Then, seemingly out of nowhere, he had company: three tall, lean, hooded figures . . . closing in on him; cutting him off from Associated Independents.

Rock laughed, deep in his throat -- a harsh laugh, without mirth; the laugh of hunter, not hunted. Turning sharply, once again he moved from the open street into a cross-slot's black shadows.

But the grim, hooded trio turned too, without hesitation.

Rock frowned, at that. It wasn't like Security, or the men who were its agents. They preferred noise and light, open spaces.

He pressed deeper into the cross-slot.

His pursuers still followed. It was almost as if they could see through the murk of the Venusian night as well as by daylight.

Or, perhaps, as if they could predict their quarry's next move before he made it.

Again, Rock frowned. But only for a moment. Palms flat to the cross-slot wall, he slid sidewise along it.

Now his hands touched the smooth metal of a vertical utility shaft imbedded in the exterior plastic. Not pausing, Rock passed by it; stepped off another fifty feet.

The second shaft came under his fingers.

Rock grinned in the darkness.

But behind him, feet shuffled. He glimpsed a hooded head, momentarily silhouetted where cross-slot joined street.

Loosening his belt, Rock unclipped the buckle and, crouching, skipped it off along the cat-walk so that it made small brushing, clicking, whispering sounds, as of someone stealthily running.

Simultaneously, he dropped flat

on his belly and pressed tight to the wall where it joined the utility shaft.

His stalkers didn't even falter. Like menacing automatons, they converged on Rock in taut silence.

ROCK BREATHED in sharply. Stiff-fingered, he felt for the duraloid lid that led to the utility conduit tunnel beneath the shaft.

It creaked as it came up, and for a moment Rock froze. But from the sound of their footsteps, the trio was still rods away and approaching with less speed than caution.

Rock decided to gamble on it. Easing himself down into the shaft, he lowered the lid quietly back into place. Then, bending double, he felt his way into the cramped confines of the conduit tunnel itself.

The tunnel hadn't been meant for a man -- not even a man as lean and lithe as Rock. Every change of position brought new knee-scrapes and elbow abrasions. Twice, he slipped and raised lumps on his head. Once a jagged connection ripped clear through his tunic. Sweat ran into his eyes and dripped from his chin. He panted with exertion.

Yet still he kept on -- worming and wriggling, writhing and squirming, back through the passage towards the cross-slot's first

shaft.

He reached it at last . . . lurched erect . . . stood immobile, listening, for a long, taut moment.

No sound came.

Warily, Rock raised the lid a fraction.

Still nothing.

Pushing the lid still higher, he peered out, searching the blackness in the vicinity of the other utility shaft.

He could see no one.

Then the faintest fragment of sound came, from far off down the cross-slot.

Rock laughed grimly. Pushing the duraloid lid the rest of the way back, he muscled himself up, half out of the shaft.

Only then, to his left, movement flickered. A shoe scraped on pavement.

Rock threw himself to one side by sheer reflex.

Something struck his left shoulder in the same instant, so hard his whole arm went limp.

Rock twisted spasmodically. He clutched at his assailant.

The other jerked back. A foot smashed at Rock's chest.

Rock caught it; clung to it.

But poised as he was, half in the shaft and half out, he couldn't get leverage. New blows rained down on him. His head rang. Blood spurted.

Still pinioning his opponent's foot, he threw himself bodily back into the shaft.

It cast his full weight on the other's leg. A sound of bone snapping came faintly, almost lost in a sharp cry of pain.

Rock braced himself against the walls of the shaft. Savagely, he wrenched at the foot.

A shriek of pure torment. The leg jerked convulsively, then went limp.

But the next instant something shoved Rock's antagonist sidewise in the pitch blackness. Metal clinked on the shaft-rim.

Like lightning, Rock twisted and snatched at the sound.

His hand dashed someone's wrist. Again, metal rang on metal. Rock's fingers closed tight round a pistol-like object. Levering the muzzle away from him, he heaved on it, straining.

For a long moment, nothing happened. Then, an inch at a time, the hand that held the weapon bent back, farther and farther.

Rock sucked in a great breath. With all his might, he smashed his opponent's hand against the shaft-wall.

The hand jerked away from him, leaving the pistol-thing behind.

Rock flipped the weapon round as he straightened. His forefinger found what seemed like a trigger.

Warily, he peered past the limp body that still lay half blocking the shaft.

A few yards away, something moved in the dimness. Rock aimed and squeezed trigger in a single swift motion.

There was a momentary vibrant hum, something like the snapping of a rubber band. A dull-glowing scarlet disc the size of a man's head flashed for an instant in the cross-slot's gloom, illuminating the shadowy form of one of Rock's stalkers.

The fraction of a second later, a body hit the cat-walk with a muffled thud.

Elbowing his way further up from the hole, Rock searched the murk for the third of his pursuers.

Feet beat in a rush, fading before he could even pin down the direction from which the sounds came.

Rock let out an explosive breath. Thrusting the pistol into his tunic, he set to the task of rolling his original attacker's body away from the shaft-mouth.

As a first step, he sought to manipulate the limp leg up and out of the hole.

But the leg seemed to hinge wrong. It swung free in three distinct places.

Frowning, Rock ran his hand the length of it.

His fingers brushed three separate knee-joints.

The hair on the back of Rock's neck rose. Again he groped along the leg, checking.

Still three knee-joints. The skin beneath the loose trouser felt strange, too . . . scaly rather than smooth, stiff and fold-crenked.

ROCK QUIT TRYING to be careful. Shoving the leg from the shaft by sheer brute force, he scrambled out onto the cat-walk, squatted beside his unconscious foe, and flicked on a small coil lamp.

The cheap synfabric clothes told him little. Feverish with haste, he threw back the other's hood; turned the tiny lamp's beam on the face.

At first he had trouble even picking out the features: they were that alien.

Involuntarily, Rock shuddered. Stepping over to the second of his attackers, he looked inside that one's hood also.

More of the same.

A drop of icy sweat slid down Rock's spine. For a split second he hesitated, listening intently for some sound of alarm. Then, kneeling, he began a closer survey.

The creature lay dead beyond doubt, its midriff seared crackle-black and stinking where the disc of scarlet light had touched it.

Pockets gave up routine contents only. The last item was a packet of cards. Rock turned his light on them.

Pictures, four of them. Portraits.

The first showed a man beyond middle age, with heavy jowls and a high-domed, balding forehead.

Doctor Gordon Pennap.

Tight-lipped, Rock moved on to the second picture in the alien's packet.

Again, recognition: the violet-eyed, silver blonde beauty who'd said her name was Narla.

Rock's own face stared up at him from the third card -- an old shot from his days in the asteroid belt. He thumbed it aside; looked at the final picture.

This portrait was of a younger man, open-faced and smiling.

His brother, Tom.

In spite of all his control, Rock's fingers trembled. Carefully, he put away the packet. Then, in two steps, he was back beside the crippled alien at the shaft-mouth.

The creature still lay unmoving. But the throat-sac showed a faint pulse and the gill-slits exhibited tendencies to flutter.

Rock gripped the thing's shoulder. His nails dug in. Savagely, he shook the creature.

No response, no resistance, no sign of awareness.

Rock cursed beneath his breath.

Swiftly, he checked the alien's pockets as he had its fellow's.

Again, four pictures. The same four.

Cold-eyed, Rock stood up. Once again he listened, but no sound of alarm came.

Then, deliberately, he kicked his prostrate adversary's broken leg.

A tremor ran through the alien.

Rock said tightly, "All right. That does it. You're conscious."

The creature gave no sign that it heard him.

Rock's lips thinned. Pulling the alien light-weapon from beneath his tunic, he bent and gouged its muzzle into his prisoner's throat-sac.

A new tremor. Eye-spots shimmered sudden iridescence.

Rock said, "That's better." And then, displaying Tom's picture as he spoke: "Now tell me what's happened to my brother."

No answer.

"Talk, you chitza! Where is he? What's Pennap done to him?"

Silence.

Rock's voice grew harsher; the grim urgency in it more intense: "I've come a long way, zanat -- clear from Ganymede to Venus, with a price on my head and Security riding my tail. All just to find Tom."

Still no response.

"I'm going to have an answer, you starbo, one way or another. If

you don't talk, Pennap will -- even if I have to pull the whole AI center down around his head to get it!"

The alien's head lolled sidewise, as if the creature were weary of listening.

If it *were* listening.

Rock's face grew hot. "All right! The hard way, then!"

He drew back a fraction, knuckles white on the pistol.

Of a sudden the alien's throat-sac quivered. Sounds came forth -- hissing, sibilant, clacking sounds.

Alien sounds, devoid of meaning to another life-form.

Rock clenched his fist. "Talk so I can understand you, rakk you!"

More hissing -- louder, this time; almost excited. A claw-hand gestured to Tom's picture.

Only at the last did Rock understand the sudden eagerness, the volume increase --

Only when another alien foot scraped, close behind him.

Desperately, he tried to twist; to jump clear.

Too late. The blow struck home.

Rock didn't even know when he hit the cat-walk . . .

CHAPTER III

ASSOCIATED INDEPENDENTS sold two things: top facilities, and absolute privacy.

Free-lance research and development men rated privacy as by far the more vital. So every AI laboratory came equipped with a force field guaranteed proof against all known listening bugs, spy eyes, simulators, and hypnotic devices.

Which could be a handicap, Rock decided. Especially to anyone in his predicament.

At the moment, he lay in Doctor Gordon Pennap's workroom, so tightly bound he couldn't even wiggle.

His head ached, too, and his stomach felt queasy, and the taste in his mouth came straight from Munga Nova.

The only trouble was, there was nothing he could do about it. Absolutely nothing.

Again, he glanced about the workroom.

The place was superlatively well equipped, even unto a cellotron and transmutational synthesizer. Reader reels filled a floor-to-ceiling rack to overflowing, and there was a transcription unit beside the desk. Tables elsewhere in the room held unfamiliar devices in various stages of assembly.

Only old Pennap himself was missing.

Wearily, Rock sighed and tried to worm himself to a somewhat more comfortable position.

Now sounds arose from the lab-

oratory unit's other room -- the one into which the hooded alien who was Rock's captor had disappeared.

A moment later the door opened, and the creature came back into the workroom. Another like it followed.

Lifting Rock between them, they half-dragged him into the second chamber.

Bleakly, he looked about.

This room was as stark and bare as the first had been cluttered. It contained only a large control-panel unit, set against one wall, and a big, door-like frame standing in the center of the floor.

Yet, for Rock, the sight of that frame almost made his plight worth while.

For the thing bristled with coils and glowing tubes and relays -- the sort of thing one met in a fantastic dream, brought forth from illusion's realm and turned to fact.

Most important of all, though, was the ball that filled the center of the frame.

A black ball, misty and indistinct around the edges . . . a whirlpool of velvety non-light just such as the girl Narla had disappeared into, back at the Ganymedian advance base compound.

In spite of himself, Rock's heart began to pound. His hands and feet felt cold, and he had trouble get-

ting his breath.

Then, almost before he knew what was happening, the hooded aliens were pushing him forward once again, straight to the frame. The next instant, they lifted him clear of the floor, swung him back and forth a couple of times as if he were a log, and then threw him headlong into the heart of the swirling blackness.

It was like passing through a panel of intense black shadow, Rock decided: light-dark-light. That was all. He felt no change, no shock, no pain. He didn't even fall, for outstretched hands caught him as he shot out into the new area of light beyond the blackness.

Blinking, hardly believing, he looked about as those who held him stood him on his feet.

For he was no longer in Gordon Pennap's laboratory, or anything remotely like it.

Instead, he stood in a room whose very construction and design were alien to him. The texture of the walls and floor, the interlaced arch-pattern of the ceiling -- they were like nothing he'd ever seen before.

Only one familiar element did he find: a frame, and control board, exact duplicates of the ones in Pennap's laboratory, stood in the center of the floor.

Briskly, hissing and clacking in their own tongue, the aliens who'd

caught him now cut free his feet and led him through a doorway, into an open street.

But it was a street in a world Rock had never known. On all sides, buildings towered skyward -- sparkling metallic buildings, so bright they seemed carved in silver.

Nor was the sun that blazed down the sun of Rock's own system. No; this star's rays glowed cool and green. And over on the far horizon, yet another sun showed, setting -- a blue sun that tinged its segment of sky with indigo.

Then Rock had no more time for observation, for his captors pushed him roughly into an unfamiliar vehicle and drove it down the street at panic-breeding speed.

To make it even worse, the street was crowded -- crowded with people who, so far as Rock could see, were human as he. Only at long intervals did he glimpse an alien like his companions.

THEN, AHEAD, a group of children came into view -- close by one of the buildings that lined the street; well out of the way of traffic.

The alien driver saw them too. He hissed and gestured.

Eager clackings from the other alien.

The driver hunched forward.

The vehicle picked up speed.

Then, before Rock could even cry out, the driver jerked the steering lever. The vehicle swerved, straight towards the children.

Rock's tongue clove to the roof of his mouth.

Ahead, the children saw their danger now and tried to run.

Too late. Like a thunderbolt, the vehicle smashed through their ranks.

Blood. Screams. Death. Anguish.

From the aliens, hilarious hissings.

Bound though he was, Rock hurled himself upon them.

Their claws left bloody streaks across his face as they shoved him back. The vehicle picked up speed again.

Only then, out of nowhere, another vehicle was closing in beside them.

It struck with a tremendous crash. The impact hurled Rock bodily from his seat, then bounced him back again as both conveyances smashed into a wall.

The alien who was driving started to lunge up.

Simultaneously, light blazed from the other vehicle.

Clutching his throat, where the light had hit, the alien died.

His fellow clawed for a weapon.

But now a woman leaped from the other rig, light-pistol in hand.

The second alien died.

Dark hair blowing, eyes blazing, the woman ran to the aliens' vehicle. Her weapon aimed straight at Rock.

"A man who'll ride with the Shanaq against his own kind should die like a Shanaq!" she cried.

It was a time when words could hold no meaning. Rock didn't bother with them.

Instead, he flung up his arms -- the tight-bound arms that proved him prisoner.

The dark-haired woman stopped short. "You -- are not free --?"

"Does it look it?"

"You are not one with the Shanaq -- you do not serve the tyrant Stregor, the Emissary of Death to System Andronaxis?"

"I told you. This isn't my world, even --"

"Not your world --?" Rock could see the woman stiffen. She clutched his bound hands and tried to drag him from the vehicle. "Then -- you must be one of the others, the ones from System Sol --"

Rock stared. "What --?"

"Quick! Hurry!" Frantically, the woman pulled at him. "I am Tirelle." And then, when Rock still looked blank: "I am one of those who fight against that mad y'lek Stregor. You from System Sol -- I've heard about you. Yet it seemed

so impossible, so incredible - - I didn't believe it. Only now - -"

Wheels screamed on pavement. Another vehicle like the one in which Rock had been riding came hurtling round a corner and skidded to a stop. A second followed. A third. Aliens leaped out.

"Run!" the woman cried. She darted away, and then between two buildings.

Desperately, Rock tried to sprint after her.

But bound as he was, he couldn't even keep his balance. Tripping, he sprawled in the dirt.

The incident ended there. Dragged up by the Shanaq, loaded aboard one of their conveyances, Rock once more found himself en route to his unknown destination.

The place to which he was being taken apparently lay somewhere along a strip of low cliffs not far outside the silver city. Rock couldn't be sure about it, though, because soon after he and his guards left the town behind, there was a pause during which he was blindfolded.

Then the vehicle moved on once more, twisting and turning over rougher and rougher roads. There were more halts, also, as if the driver had to stop at various guard posts.

After the last pause, Rock sensed that, vehicle and all, they'd moved

under cover. It showed in the sound of things, the hollowness and tendency to echoes.

A MOMENT LATER, one of his alien escorts jerked off the blindfold.

Numbly, Rock stared.

For this place was well worth staring at.

Once, apparently, it had been a gigantic natural cavern.

Now man and his allies had worked it over. Everywhere, there spread a network of galleries and catwalks. Big banks of lights turned darkness into day. Workers hurried to and fro, busy on a major project: a monstrous, 50-foot magnification of the door-like frame through which Rock had passed when he'd come to this world from Venus.

But already his captors were hurrying him on, into a side area blocked off into offices and workshops.

The place they sought, apparently, was a sort of conference room, large and comfortable, at the end of a long corridor.

Here, another alien sat at an oddly-designed desk. Rock's companions promptly plunged into a brief, sibilant conversation with him. When it was over, he in turn spoke into a communicator unit.

After that, everyone leaned back

and waited.

Then, behind Rock, a voice said, "Welcome, brother Dave - - welcome to the Mendak Construction Laboratory!"

Rock spun round. "Tom - -!"

He tried not to look too closely at the hollow cheeks, the worried eyes, the first grey traces at the temples.

Tom went on as if this were the most commonplace of meetings: "Remember Narla, Dave . . . ?"

And there was the girl beside Tom, violet eyes grave, ash-silver hair shimmering under the bright lights.

Rock began, "Tom, listen - -"

"I know, Dave. You've got questions." Tom's laugh was cynical and bitter. "Though what good talking about all this will do, I can't imagine. Not now. Not with Stregor holding you and me too."

"That name - -" Rock gestured, thinking back to the girl who called herself Tirelle, with her line about 'the Emissary of Death to System Andronaxis'. "Stregor. Who is he?"

Tom shrugged wearily. "A tyrant. And the man who runs this planet - - Kaldei Zagad, of System Andronaxis."

"But - -"

"Time's short, Dave. I'll give it to you in a capsule." Rock's brother ran thin fingers through his hair. "This all started with some experi-

ment of Gordon Pennap's - - incidentally, he's dead, I guess, another casualty to Stregor.

"Anyhow, Pennap had an idea for extending the range of interspatial travel. There's no point to trying to explain the details, except that it used the principle of magnetic induction, and operated practically instantaneously.

"As our first really long-range test, we focused on Kaldei Zagad, here. We didn't know it was inhabited, or even habitable. All we wanted was a planet a long way off.

"Then it turned out that Kaldei Zagad not only was inhabited, but that the inhabitants were mostly humanoid, and at about our stage of cultural development. One of their scientists - - Narla's father - - had even been experimenting along our same lines.

"The only catch was, Stregor's spies picked up word of what was going on, and he grabbed all of us and ordered us to build him a giant frame that would operate just like our experimental model."

Tom paused and again ran fingers through his hair; and again Rock was acutely conscious of how gaunt and feverish his brother looked. "Well, Dave, I guess that's about all. Except that I'm sorry I got panicky and dragged you into this . . ."

His voice trailed off.

Rock frowned. Something was wrong here, something he couldn't quite pinpoint. Tom wasn't talking like the brother he knew. The jitteriness, the air of defeat -- somehow, they didn't ring true.

And yet --

A claw-hand struck his shoulder. One of the aliens, the Shanaq, shoved him away from Tom and Narla, across the room towards an open door which led into a cubicle Rock took to be a pneumolift.

He didn't resist. For now, it seemed as if the best course might be to keep on gathering information for a while.

The lift door closed behind him and the aliens. Rock had a sudden sense of lancing upward. Then, smoothly, the door opened again, and he was ushered out by his escorts.

It was by far the most opulent room Rock had ever seen. The vaulted ceiling rose so high as almost to be lost in shadow. A fragrance surely artificial filled the air, and lilting music wafted through the huge, uncluttered room that stretched away to great windows along one wall.

Over there, in the pale light, a man sat silent and unmoving before a large, box-like device of a sort Rock had never seen before.

CUFFED AND BUFFETED by his guards, he stumbled closer to the silent stranger.

Now the man looked up; and never had Rock seen anyone so pallid, or with such a high-domed forehead.

Yet had he been asked to describe the other, he would have done so in terms of mouth, not skull or skin tone.

Because the mouth was that cruel, that ruthless.

"I am Stregor," the man said, smiling in a way that sent a chill rippling up and down Rock's spine. "They call me the Emissary of Death to System Andronaxis."

Rock answered, "My name's Rock." He let it go at that.

Stregor nodded approvingly. "I like understatement, even though I seldom indulge in it."

He gestured as he spoke. Instantly, the alien guards struck off Rock's bonds, then backed away.

Rock said nothing, and resisted the urge to rub circulation back into his arms.

Stregor said, "I could use a man like you." And then, dryly, when Rock still stood silent, "Though I'd not be fool enough to try it."

In spite of himself, Rock almost laughed. Surely he could recall no stranger interview!

"No," Stregor said slowly, "you're no man to trifl with, and I know

it. But you still will prove useful in spite of yourself."

"Oh?" Rock kept his voice wooden.

"Of course." Again the other's lips twisted in their sinister smile. "You see, David Rock, your brother thinks he's clever."

The back of Rock's neck prickled.

"He has a plan, you see," the tyrant went on. "He knows that when my Gate of Conquest is completed, I'll use it to invade your system. So he dreams of thwarting me by forgetting key details, making mistakes, open sabotage."

So that was why Tom had behaved so strangely . . .

"I know this," Stregor continued grimly, "because it is the verdict of my Hak'kah cube, the metal brain that helps me with my plans."

He caressed the box as he spoke. His finger flicked a switch. "This man, David Rock . . ." he murmured, as if addressing the cube. "You have the data on him. Now: what is your verdict?"

A faint whirring sound rose from the machine. Then, abruptly, a harsh metallic voice rasped, "Kill him!"

Rock caught the tiny tremor of tension that ran through Stregor.

"But I need him! Why should I kill him?"

"Kill him!" the box repeated.

"Kill him now -- or he'll kill you!"

The Emissary of Death snapped off the switch. The eyes he turned on Rock were calculating. "Were it not for your brother," he observed, "you'd be already dead. I trust my Hak'kah cube." A pause. "However, the Gate of Conquest is for the moment most important of all my projects. My neighbors on the other planets of the system band against me. In consequence, it seems wise for me to leave here for a while."

Rock shrugged, said nothing.

"You see," the other went on, "with you my prisoner, your brother will not dare to flout my orders, lest I slay you."

Still Rock waited.

"And, finally, I've picked the ideal place to hold you -- a place I need not fear you, regardless of your prowess or your hate."

As he spoke, Stregor led Rock to the room's great windows and leveled a long forefinger at the sky. "Do you see it?" he demanded.

Rock strained his eyes till at last he caught a tiny dot adrift in the pale green firmament overhead.

"That is my battle satellite," said Stregor. "It is the weapon with which in the past I've held my enemies at bay. Its tubes hold missiles set for every satellite, every planet, in the whole of System Andronaxis.

Let me throw the master switch up there in that artificial world's control room, and death will rain down on my foes -- every one! I've done it before; that's why they fear me --"

He broke off sharply, suddenly brooding. "But here -- we're wasting time. And every moment that I'm with you is a menace, for the Hak'kah cube says you may kill me --"

He gestured.

Like magic, the Shanaq guards appeared and seized Rock.

"Efficient, aren't they?" The tyrant laughed softly. "They're the reason I trusted you with me, you know; they'd have slain you long ere you could touch me. They and their kind brought me to power. I can depend on them. Because they love the smell of death as I do. They grow up with it, in their homes amid the ancients' green stone tombs over there" -- he pointed out the window towards the mouth of a narrow, dull green gorge -- "in the City of the Dead!"

Again, he broke off; and now his manner was strangely, openly, distracted.

"Take him away!" he cried suddenly to the guards. "Get him out of here, and to the battle satellite at once!"

Unresisting, Rock allowed him-

self to be hurried back into the pneumolift. But a deep chill ran through him.

Beyond doubt, in his own mind, the man called Stregor was starkly and completely mad!

CHAPTER IV

ACTUAL DIRECT-OBSERVA-
tion ports supplemented the usual visiscreens here in the battle satellite's viewing chamber. Occupants could look out in virtually all directions, through what appeared to be monstrous crystal lenses.

Off to the right -- at least, Rock's right of the moment -- the giant blue star-sun of System Andronaxis blazed blindingly despite its 200,000,000 miles of distance.

To the left, the system's other sun, the green one, pulsed the invisible gravitational counterpoint that helped hold Andronaxis' sixteen planets and forty-four satellites in their precarious, distorted orbits.

Elsewhere, on all sides and overhead alike, spread the whole black fathomless gulf of outer space -- a different segment of space than Rock had ever known before, sprayed with the gem-bright sparkle of a million unknown stars and of worlds still, for him, without names.

Yet Rock hardly noticed the dazzling grandeur of the far-flung

panorama. Instead, he could only think that out there, somewhere, stood other vengeful foes of Stregor; that was all. That these others would gladly sell their souls to slay the tyrant -- such he took for granted.

Chiefly, however, his attention focused on the rear port -- the one with the overhang that allowed him to look down and back in the direction from which the carrier had brought him: back, to the great, hazy, lazy-spinning purple ball the men of System Andronaxis called Kaldei Zagad.

Kaldei Zagad, where a hollow-cheeked, raw-nerved Tom no doubt paced feverishly through the mammoth, cave-concealed Mendak Construction Laboratory at this moment. Kaldei Zagad, where the cold-eyed paranoid named Stregor sat hunched night after night before the strange, tri-dimensional Hak'kah cube that was his passion, working out invasion plans with the ice-edged logic of a chessmaster of Earth, in preparation for the moment when his great Gate of Conquest at last should be completed.

They were adversaries to speed the pulse and chill the blood, Stregor and his Hak'kah cube. Not for nothing had the girl Tirelle called the pale man the Emissary of Death to System Andronaxis.

As for the Hak'kah cube -- Involuntarily, Rock shuddered. It was one thing to meet human foes in battle. Or even extraterrestrials. But to clash with a mechanical adversary, an opponent beyond all human error or miscalculation -- that was something else again.

The thought of Stregor and his homicidal toy turned loose upon another, less-adequately conditioned system brought a chill knot to the pit of Rock's stomach. The men of Earth and Mars, Venus and Mercury, the Belt and the Outer Satellites and all the rest -- they weren't geared to this sort of murder madness. Look at the havoc already created among them by the Drossa! Let Stregor complete his gate, cut loose his hooded horles, and it could well mean the end of a whole culture.

Yet how devilishly subtle, how devoid of weakness, was Stregor's scheming! Devastation, invasion, revenge, conquest -- he combined them all in a single welling chord of ruthlessness.

Like that other tyrant of whom Rock somewhere had read. The one up from antiquity, what was his name -- Caesar of Earth? Yes, that was it. Julius Caesar, who'd stormed across the river, burning his bridges behind him.

That was the way Stregor would play it, certainly. His laugh had

made that plain.

Without even thinking, Rock could visualize the procedure. Once Tom had completed construction of the Gate of Conquest, and tested it thoroughly, Stregor would pour through his homicidal hordes, into an unsuspecting, already-Drossa-shattered System Sol.

But before he finally departed Kaldei Zagad, he'd activate the battle satellite, trigger off his charges . . . a final, awful vengeance upon his foes throughout System Andronaxis.

Then, even more satisfying to one of Stregor's tastes, would come the aftermath; the savage, converging waves of attack on Kaldei Zagad, hammering in from every satellite and planet, till no two stones were left one upon the other and the last living cell had gone down in death.

Including, of course, the girl called Tirelle, and any others classified by Stregor as part of a disloyal opposition.

After which, Stregor had only to wait awhile till the hue and cry and tumult had died down. Then, quietly, he could return from System Sol again via his cavern gateway, complete with new forces and resources, and once more set the whole mad holocaust here blazing.

That is, that was what would happen unless one David Rock

could somehow stop him.

'Unless' - -? Rock laughed, harsh and bitter. There couldn't be any 'unless' about it. He had to do it, that was all. What choice did he have, with two whole solar systems and the Life of his only brother hanging in the balance?

Only that was sheer and utter madness. How could any lone individual - - a prisoner, at that - - even dream of challenging such odds?

IN SPITE OF HIMSELF, Rock smiled a little. How could this be, that he was thinking in terms of dreams and madness? When had logic or common sense ever played any part in his deeds, his way of living? That was what Security complained about, ever and always. The sober-sided, common-sense, logical ones, the authorities - - they didn't like the idea of a man challenging fate, spitting in destiny's eye. It gave the wrong ideas to too many. That was why they'd stuck him in that damned Ganymedian compound, while they tried to lull a system's people into forgetting that one man had united Chonya and Malya against the Skrii. The trouble on Mercury; that business of the Jupiterian satellites - - those all were things best wiped from the record, in Security's jaundiced eyes.

So, now, he was here, alone, and madness was the only possible course to follow. Premium quality madness, at that.

And, he must work fast. For once the Gate of Conquest was completed, the invasion of System Sol under way, and the battle satellite's charges triggered, there'd be no more --

Rock stopped short. In spite of himself, his breath came faster.

What was that order, as hypothesized by Stregor and the Hak'kah cube?

First, complete the Gate of Conquest.

Second, invade System Sol.

Third, activate the battle satellite.

But what if someone reversed the order? What if the satellite were activated BEFORE the gate could be completed?

It might be possible -- especially if the someone were already aboard the satellite, even though a prisoner.

For a long, long moment, Rock stood unmoving, staring down through the crystal port at Kaldei Zagad in a sort of numb fascination. In his mind's eyes, he visioned the sudden, smashing impact as Stregor's foes retaliated for the satellite charges -- the fiery lances slashing through Kaldei's defenses . . . the yellow mush-

rooms -- soaring, spreading . . . the great clouds of purple dust swirling up, blanketing and blocking out the landscape.

What more fitting end to Stregor's dreams of conquest? And conceivably, Tom might even survive the cataclysm.

Rock laughed aloud. Pivoting, he moved quietly, casually, in the direction of the viewing room's control cage.

Three steps, he took.

Then, abruptly, an overhead amplifier squawked words: "Prisoner! You are not permitted to leave the port walk, or to approach the control cage in any way!"

Rock shrugged; smiled thinly. "Sorry; I didn't know." He went back to the narrow walk that led around the viewing chamber's periphery. Then, thoughtfully, from that vantage-point, he reappraised his prison.

The place held little to console him. Stark and bare, like some great, metal-ribbed bubble, apparently it protruded from the very tip of the battle satellite. The thick crystal observation ports alternated with visiscreen plates. And, so far as Rock could see, the only way to enter or leave the place seemed to be the central cage that rose like a hub above the shaft in the exact middle of the room.

Also, one way or another, it was obvious he was under constant observation: the quick response to his attempt to reach the control cage proved that.

Which fact of observation, in turn, offered opportunities for an interesting gambit.

Rock raised his voice: "Guard!"

No answer.

Louder, this time: "Guard, I'm hungry, thirsty. There's not even a decent place here to lie down."

"Silence, prisoner! You are not permitted to speak!"

"I'm not?" Rock couldn't help but chuckle. For no good reason, all at once, his whole situation took on a comic-opera flavor. It was all he could do to keep from laughing out loud.

By way of substitution, he went deftly to work with verbal needles; "What am I permitted to do, guard? You tell me!"

"Silence, prisoner!"

"I'm tired of keeping quiet!" Rock paced the walk. He grinned openly; thrust taunting recklessness into his voice: "Besides, how can you shut me up? Stregor himself's given orders I'm not to be harmed in any way. Remember?"

"Silence, prisoner!" The other's roar came so loud and furious that Rock knew instantly he'd touched a tender spot.

"As a matter of fact," he an-

nounced, following up his advantage, "I don't see any real reason why I should stay away from that cage, so long as you're not here to stop me."

SUITING ACTIONS TO
words, he strode out boldly as he spoke, straight to the room's hub.

But as he reached the cage, a lock clicked; and though he hurled himself violently against the bars of the gate, it remained rigid and immobile.

Drawing back a step, Rock kicked savagely at the bolt.

Metal rang on metal. The voice from the squawk-box snarled, "Stop, you split-skull!"

Rock laughed. "Make me!"

"I'll throw a charge through the bolt, rack you!"

Rock kicked the gate again.

Blue sparks showered forth. Smoke spurted from Rock's heavy boot.

It seemed like an ideal time for more histrionics. With a wild shriek, Rock hurled himself high into the air and backward, twisting and twitching as he slammed to the floor, face down, in what he hoped was a convincing simulation of some sort of convulsion.

For a long moment he lay thus, unmoving. Then, a trifle raggedly, the squawk-box boomed: "Prison-

er! Get up!"

Rock didn't move.

"You, prisoner! I'm talking to you! Get up!"

Not even by so much as the flickering of an eyelid did Rock indicate that he was conscious.

"You, prisoner . . ." There was no mistaking the raggedness of the other's voice now. It held a note that came close to sheer panic. "Get up, rack you, before I come in there and put a boot in your ribs!"

Rock stayed motionless, silent.

"Rack you, you split-skull!" Now the guard sounded as if he were on the verge of sobbing panic. Then his voice trailed off.

A moment later, a faint drone of power equipment in operation drifted to Rock. A sudden draft told him the shaft-lift was rising.

Ten seconds later, the cage-gate's bolt clicked. A boot scraped the floor of the viewing chamber.

"All right, you rhosaur! Get up!" Person to person this time. Mixed rage and fear, poured out direct, without benefit of squawk-box.

Still Rock didn't move.

The boot smashed at his ribs, a painful blow. Then, when Rock still didn't budge, the toe dug in and flopped him over.

Rock let his jaw go slack. He rolled his eyes back as far as they'd

go; lolled limp and loose-jointed as any new-dead corpse.

The way the guard caught his breath gave better commentary than any words. A moment later the man was on his knees beside Rock -- feeling for his pulse, slapping at his cheeks.

Rock waited till the other was hunched so far over as to be completely off balance. Then, with a sudden, convulsive tensing, he drove an elbow deep into the guard's solar plexus.

A moment of spasmodic struggle, then. It ended with Rock in possession of a pistol-like weapon his antagonist had been carrying.

Scrambling to his feet, Rock jerked up the guard. "We're going down now," he clipped. "All the way down, straight to the control room. Understand?"

Muddy brown eyes pulsed hate at him. A sullen mouth challenged him to force the issue.

Rock said, "You're under orders to keep me alive, remember? But me, I'd rather see you dead than walking . . ."

He leveled the pistol.

The sullen mouth sucked in breath. The muddy eyes distended. "No --! Don't shoot! I'll take you . . ." Already the guard was turning, moving back into the shaft-lift.

Rock crowded in close behind

him, finger taut on the trigger. "Straight down, now. All the way. And if anything happens, you die first."

A tremor ran through the guard. Hands shaking, he worked the lift's controls.

Swift, silent, the lift dropped below the level of the viewing chamber's floor. Down, and down, and still down -- further and further, faster and faster.

Rock said, "Remember, the control room."

The guard pulled back a lever. The plummeting lift slowed.

TAUT-NERVED, tight-lipped, Rock waited. He still didn't dare to think about what he'd done. Not yet. It was still too unbelievable; still too completely in contradiction of all conceivable odds.

Now the guard brought the shaft-lift to a quaking halt.

Rock prodded him with the pistol. "The control room --?"

The sullen lips quivered. "Straight ahead. Right down this hall."

"Just lead the way."

Together, they moved down the corridor, till at last they reached a dead end at a heavy, unmarked door.

Rock gestured with the pistol. "You first."

The guard shuffled forward. Heavy-handed, he shoved at the portal.

Rock kicked him in the back of the knees in the same instant.

The guard spilled sprawling across the threshold. Leaping over him, Rock made the far side of the room in one mad rush; whirled, pistol up and ready.

Over in the corner, a startled guard came half off a stool. At the other end of the room, a second man clawed for a weapon similar to the one Rock held.

Rock squeezed the trigger. The pistol-thing in his hand pulsed as with a faint vibration. A silvery cone of light flared forth.

The second man, the one with the weapon, stopped short in mid-stride. His pistol clattered to the floor. He fell atop it.

Rock spun and fired again.

The guard in the corner dropped.

Rock crossed to the door by which he'd entered; peered out, searching for the muddy-eyed man who'd guided him this far.

The fellow had vanished without a trace.

A tiny chill ran down Rock's spine. How much time did he have, before that escaped guard would be back with a hundred of his fellows? A minute, maybe? Half a minute? Ten seconds?

Involuntarily, Rock shivered.

Pivoting, he strode to the room's second door, opened it a crack, and warily peered through.

Another eye stared into his.

Rock threw himself forward by sheer reflex, driving the door-edge square into the other's face.

The man cried out; stumbled back.

Fiercely, Rock pursued him.

But now, from all sides, half-a-dozen other crewmen closed in. In seconds, they pinioned Rock, clutching his arms and legs and body till he could hardly move a muscle.

Almost in the same moment, someone laughed aloud. With an effort, Rock turned his head.

It was the muddy-eyed man, the guard he'd captured.

Silently, Rock cursed his luck.

Now the other came close, lumpy face a sadistic mask. The brown eyes had the uneven sheen of water-mottled leather.

Without a word, then, the man struck Rock full in the face.

Rock's head spun.

Another blow. Another . . . The room began to sway, shapes to distort.

Someone said, "Hold it, Egri. Stregor doesn't want him hurt."

And another voice: "That's right, Wope! We better get an officer to check this!"

"We'll check it, all right!" This

from the muddy-eyed man. He was leering, sneering. "Take him on into Controls. Let old Ugal do the deciding."

Half dragged, half stumbling, Rock was led down a short hall, then up a tight spiral staircase. At the top, one of his captors swung open a heavy door, and the whole group thronged into the brightly-lighted expanse of the control room.

The muddy-eyed guard sent Rock reeling with another buffet. "Well, you split-skull! Is this the place you wanted?" Sadistic triumph rang in his voice.

But now an officer was striding towards them. His words crackled: "Here, you! What is this?"

Muddy-eyes told him, profanely and in detail.

Rock hardly listened.

As the guard had said, this was the place he'd wanted to come -- right here, to the control room.

The question now was, couldn't he somehow make good use of his presence, for all his current misadventure?

STEALTHILY, he glanced sideways along the shining row of polished plates and dials and panels.

And there, not too far off, stood the one he sought; the weapons panel, with its pre-set fire-control for every launcher unit of this great

battle satellite.

And there too was the master switch, the trigger. Throw it, and cataclysm would hurtle down on every world in System Andronaxis.

Then, after that, retaliation. An end to Stregor and his Hak'kah cube and dreams of conquest.

The problem was, how to throw that lever.

Now the officer was speaking to Rock: "You, prisoner! What was it you wanted here in this control room? What idiocy made you try to break through?"

Carefully, Rock kept his eyes away from the launcher panel, the master trigger.

"Do you hear me, prisoner? I want an answer!"

Rock stood very still, trying desperately to hold his breathing steady.

"Answer me, you prokash sala!"

Rock swayed a little, just enough so his captors could not help but notice. He let his jaw sag and his lids droop. A thin stream of saliva spilled from one corner of his mouth.

Then, coolly, deliberately, he went limp - - every joint and muscle.

The pull of his weight dragged his captors off balance. Someone cursed aloud. Rock found himself sprawled in almost complete suspension: toes on the floor, knees

barely clear of it, the rest of him hanging at an angle.

It was the exact moment, just as he'd planned it. Like lightning, before those who held him could shift to meet the change of balance, Rock threw tension and power back into his muscles. With all his might, he lunged straight forward.

The restraining hands lost their grip. The top of Rock's head hit the interrogating officer low in the belly; knocked the man backward.

Rock ran, then, with every ounce of drive and energy he could muster: away from his captors, straight down the room towards the weapons panel, the master switch.

Behind him, someone shouted. A hurtling body struck his hip and almost knocked him over.

Desperate, staggering, he threw himself across the few remaining yards.

Hands clutched him; tried to drag him down.

But Rock's own hand was on the master switch now. Savagely, he jerked it down.

A tremor ran through the battle satellite.

Rock let go of the trigger switch and slumped to the floor.

Whatever happened now, it wouldn't matter. That tremor - - it told the story. He'd succeeded, he'd fired all charges.

Like it or not, Stregor was at

war with his whole solar system!

CHAPTER V

THEY MAULED ROCK, in those following moments. He expected it. It was more than he could hope to survive now.

Besides, with this moment of triumph and released tension, weariness had come to him. He was tired . . . so very tired.

So he didn't even bother to resist much. The blows, the kicks, the buffets - - he took them as his due, the penance he must make in exchange for taking this last, desperate chance to save his brother Tom and System Sol.

Only then, incredibly, the blows stopped coming. The voice of the officer sliced through the angry snarls and curses of the men.

"Stop it, you fools! Stop it! Don't kill him!"

As he shouted, the officer pulled off Rock's assailants . . . jerked him to his feet and slammed him back against the wall.

Still not quite believing, Rock could only stand and stare.

Now his acid-tongued savior turned upon him: "Do you think you'll get off this easy, rack you? Do you think Stregor will let you slip away to death even in hours or days?"

It didn't seem the kind of ques-

tion that required an answer, Rock decided.

The officer spun back to his subordinates. "Take this scum to a cell and keep him there - - alive! You're responsible for him from this moment!"

Someone shoved Rock towards the nearest doorway.

Only then, before he could reach it, the whole battle satellite lurched violently. Rock's feet left the floor. He hurtled through the air; crashed with numbing force against the far wall of the room.

By the time he recovered his breath, the satellite was coming back on an even keel.

Simultaneously, someone shouted, "Commander - -! Look! The screen - -!"

Rock glanced quickly around, and discovered that the man assigned to lock him up now lay unconscious against a dented panel unit. The others apparently had forgotten such details as prisoners in their own excitement.

Rock liked that. It almost fanned a spark of hope to life inside him.

It dawned on him also, however, that the satellite's crewmen had grown strangely quiet.

Warily, he cast a quick glance in their direction.

He needn't have bothered with the caution. To a man, the lot of them stood grouped about a giant

visiscreen, staring up at it with a sort of horrified fascination.

Rock frowned, and himself gave attention to the big plate.

It was a tracking screen, he saw now -- one designed to follow the course of the satellite's missiles. At the moment, it seemed to be focussed on a projectile thundering down on some distant planet.

Then, while he watched, sparks lighted on the planet's surface.

The next instant, the projectile shattered to atoms far out in the void, long before it came even close to its target.

The sparks moved out from the planet also, lancing through the void faster and faster, seemingly straight towards the battle satellite and its tracking screen.

Someone muttered, "Proximity radiation units and retaliation tubes, by Kez!" And another, hysterically: "May Stregor rot, he's killed us!"

Hastily, the officer in the lead, the whole group moved to another screen.

Here, they could see the world below; their own world, Kaldei Zagad.

Or what was left of it. For already purple dust was spewing forth in great, festooning cloud-banks. And still the missiles rained down on it, blazing as they struck in one mighty, continuing blast-

wave.

They moved to a third screen, set to show all things approaching the satellite itself.

Here, the projectiles were like hail spattering on the glass of a skylight.

In a tight, strained voice, the officer said, "At least, after that first blast, the repellers seem to be working."

Only then, like an exclamation point to cap his words, a new group of missiles, somehow different in appearance than the others, speared in towards the screen.

A man shouted, "Penetrators! Look out --!"

The blast-wave rolled in like an echo. The satellite shock, shivered, lurched. Even in the control room, plates split asunder.

As one, the crewman and their officer fled.

THE NEXT INSTANT the artificial gravity units went off. Rock found himself floating in mid-air, while his midriff churned with the reverberating impact of new missiles striking.

The visiscreens were blank now -- power gone, plates shattered. But he knew instinctively that the satellite had been driven from its course by the bombardment . . . that it had left its orbit and even now was hurtling through the void.

To what destination?

Rock decided not to wait to find out. Instead, cursing the lack of gravity, he dragged himself along one wall and through a doorway.

Outside, a little way down the corridor, two crewmen were levering down an emergency carrier's loading hatch.

Rock started towards them.

Then, another blast-wave. The corridor walls bulged. A ceiling plate tore loose and shot down, missing Rock by inches.

It didn't miss the two guards. Both were dead by the time Rock reached them.

But at least, the carrier's hatch was open. Scrambling inside, Rock muscled down the lid and locked it. Then with a silent prayer, he pulled the release lever.

The force with which the tiny craft shot out from the satellite drove him back so hard against his acceleration couch that he blacked out. By the time he recovered, the parent ship was long out of view, the carrier itself drifting slowly down into the thick purple fog that now shrouded Kaldei Zagad.

The sight sparked Rock to instant action. He could hardly think of a fate worse than to be stranded in some forgotten corner of this doomed planet.

Especially not when he'd survived thus far, in spite of all the

incredible odds against him. If his luck held, he still might even find Tom and fight his way back to System Sol!

Hastily, he set about mastering the carrier's unfamiliar controls.

It proved not such a difficult task. Manipulating carefully, while he wolfed down packets of emergency rations, he cruised on, over seas and deserts, mountains and rolling hills and level plains.

Then, ahead, he glimpsed the long, converging lines that were wheelspoke roads and, in the distance, at the hub, the curve of Stregor's silver city.

Relief flooded through Rock. Coasting in past the spaceport, he circled the low stone cliffs beyond, searching for some clue to the exact location of the vast cave where the Mendak Construction Laboratory and Stregor's Gate of Conquest lay.

Far below, then, he caught sight of a narrow gorge that bit deep into the cliff's crags . . . a gorge colored a dull, mottled green.

The same dull green as the serpentine from which was carved the City of the Dead - -!

And that meant the cave would lie close by, between but in sight of both the gorge and the silver city!

New tension touched Rock. Tight-lipped, he made a quick, low run along the strip of cliff.

The first pass, he saw nothing. But returning, viewing the bluffs from a different angle, a splotch of loose rubble caught his eye.

Rock brought the carrier in even closer.

Now he could detect the curve of a camouflaged roadway and, above it on the cliff-face, a shadow that might well be an entrance shaft.

Cautiously, he set the carrier down.

Though the bombardment and blast-wave had subsided, their aftermath remained. A high pall of dust hung over jumbled scenes of utter desolation.

The thought of searching through it all for Tom was almost more than Rock could stomach. Yet he had no choice. So, after a moment's hesitation, he released the hatch-lid and dropped to the ground.

He had been right. This was the cavern entrance.

Beyond that -- Rock shuddered. No human being could have survived.

Nor did he need to worry about Stregor's plans to invade another system. For once, the Hak'kah cube had played the tyrant false. The whole great Gate of Conquest lay in ruins, utterly beyond repair.

SLOWLY, ROCK MOVED ON, checking and re-checking each

crumpled body. But though the dead were many, he found no sign of Tom.

Where, then, had his brother gone?

He was still pondering the question when something scraped behind him.

Rock whirled by reflex.

Too late. Already his assailant was upon him. A blow to the side of the head, and Rock went to his knees.

Rough hands seized him, dragged him to his feet before he could even shake the haze from his eyes.

Or . . . were they really hands - - -

For all his control, a tremor ran through Rock. He forced himself to concentrate, to look up.

And stared straight into a Shanaq's ghoulish alien features.

Two more flanked him, one on either side.

Rock shuddered again.

But they gave him little time to consider his position. Instead, hissing and clacking in their own strange language, they jerked him forward and hurried him from the cave.

It didn't even surprise him when they turned right outside the entrance.

Right, towards the gorge of serpentine, the dull-green City of the Dead.

It was the weirdest road he would ever travel. For now, as they approached, he saw that what from a higher angle had appeared mere eroded outcroppings along the gorge's edge actually were great monoliths . . . massive carven figures of departed warriors, now stationed here for all eternity, forever on guard over this strange empire of the slain.

Then they were at the gorge's brink . . . moving slowly, precariously, down into the very chasm. Already, below, Rock could see chiseled bas-reliefs along the maze of twisting bypaths, the narrow tombs hewn from living rock.

Still his captors pressed on, moving along the near side of the gorge.

Then, abruptly, they rounded a protruding ledge.

Here a sort of plateau spread before them. On one side, the wall of the canyon formed a backdrop. Elsewhere, the ground continued to fall away, down into the tomb-lined avenues of the City of the Dead.

Now one of Rock's captors flung out a peculiar, rattling cry.

Like magic, other aliens began to appear from a hundred hiding places along the canyon wall. In seconds, the whole plateau was alive with them.

Bleakly, Rock wondered as to what would be his fate.

The Shanaq didn't leave him long in doubt.

On the far side of the plateau, and below its rim, lay a broad, shallow gully with a high stone wall around it.

Almost before Rock realized what was happening, his captors had hauled him to a small gate in this wall and shoved him through it, while their gathering fellows lined the parapets above.

Cold-eyed, Rock stared about him.

The place was an arena, obviously; a sort of crude amphitheatre.

Which made him entertainment of some sort.

And it went without saying that whatever the procedure, the scheduled climax no doubt would be his death.

It didn't surprise him too much. To creatures like the Shanaq, it was clear from the start his chief value would be for sport.

On the other hand, he didn't have to cooperate in whatever fiendishness they planned. Nor did he intend to.

Once again, he looked around; surveyed his situation.

Now, for the first time, he noted that the biggest concentration of Shanaq was grouping around the plateau end of the arena. A knot of authoritative-looking aliens, in particular, had taken places at the

highest point and now were hissing eagerly among themselves.

Also, directly below them, an inner wall overlapped the outer, lower but parallel with it.

It might, Rock decided, be worth his while to look behind it.

But before he had taken three steps toward it, a sudden roar of sound blasted at him.

It was all Rock could do to keep from turning, running. The blast was that loud, that horrifying.

Only there was no place to run to. Not here; not in this stone trap.

Raw-nerved, Rock stood his ground.

And now, down by the inner wall, movement erupted. With a rush, a creature thundered out into the open -- a creature such as Rock had never seen before.

It had three heads, for one thing; and each was a scaly, fang-toothed, horn-crowned horror, with great rolling scarlet eyes, and ringed nostrils, and a long snake-neck that bore sharp-spined serrations.

Then, as if that were not enough, the thing had eight clawed, knee-spiked legs, and two sets of wings that must have spread to twenty feet each, and a tail like an ancient mace, bony and saw-edged and dangerous.

If the creature hadn't stood here

before him, Rock wouldn't have believed it. It was simply impossible, a slice from a bad dream.

But see it he did; and, seeing, went stiff with shock.

Because he recognized it.

THIS WAS THE MONSTER that men called the Drossa! Those great horns had skewered dozens at Horla. Bandjaran had seen that awful tail smash whole buildings. The reports from Calak said the nostrils spurted fire, and the breath drove men to madness . . .

Shuffling, lumbering, the creature moved towards Rock.

Taut-nerved, Rock leaped sideways.

Barely in time, too. For one of the monstrous, diamond-shaped heads speared out at him. The fire from its nostrils singed the hair off his left forearm.

So that was no myth either. The thing did breathe fire. Like some hideous living blowtorch, it could scorch and sear.

Sweat streamed down Rock's forehead. He licked his lips and kept backing.

Another rush from the monster. Again, the barest evasion.

Man and monster were down at the far end of the gully now, away from the plateau and the mass of the Shanaq.

The fact seemed to irritate the Drossa. It drew close to the wall, then followed it around, as if trying to herd Rock back towards the other end.

Cursing, unable to get around the creature, Rock once more retreated.

And now, as his first panic wore off, he became dimly aware that something about the whole situation bothered him -- something over and beyond fear, and his personal peril.

For one thing, why did the Drossa toy with him this way? All the reports he'd heard said no victim could evade it for more than brief seconds.

Then too, why didn't it break out, leave the arena? At Horla, they claimed it had charged straight through reinforced buildings. This crumbling stone wall wouldn't hold it a moment.

Again, how had such horrors gotten to System Sol, even with Strengor's connivance? And how had they left again, after wrecking whole cities?

Above all, why was this particular specimen herding him back to the other end of the gully?

Those questions -- they nagged at Rock, in spite of his raw nerves. Without quite knowing why, recognizing in advance how futile was the gesture, he snatched up a fist-

sized stone and hurled it at his tormentor.

The head that was Rock's target dodged easily. The stone bounced off a foot with a faint clangling sound.

Rock went rigid.

Flesh and blood didn't clang -- not even faintly; not even in monsters. Clanging was a quality reserved for metals.

A vast light flashed for Rock, like dawn breaking. Warily, he feinted, then raced to one side.

The Drossa's eight feet plowed up dirt as it wheeled to follow.

But Rock had hardly half an eye for it. His attention focused elsewhere: on the Shanaq crowded tight along the plateau end of the wall, hissing and clacking.

Sure enough, one gripped a dull-black cube as big as a man's head.

Again, Rock dodged the Drossa. Again, he snatched up a stone.

Only this time he smiled grimly as he did it.

The Drossa paused, just an instant. Then, thundering, it lunged at Rock.

Barely in time, he leaped out of the way.

It put him in exactly the right position -- a few feet out from the wall, and directly in front of the alien with the black cube.

Without pause or hesitation, Rock hurled the stone straight at

the Shanaq's head.

It struck square as a war club; hard enough that Rock could hear its impact even in the arena. The Shanaq pitched forward.

Simultaneously, the Drossa stopped dead in its tracks.

And that was the answer: no monster, but a horror-masked robot; not flesh and blood, but plastic-sheathed metal.

Another genius-stroke of Streigor's Hak'kah cube, no doubt; one more fiendish scheme for softening up System Sol prior to actual invasion.

But Rock had no time to gloat on his feat; no time for triumph.

Instead, he sprinted full-tilt for the lower end of the gully.

Up the rough wall, then. Over it. A quick drop to the ground.

A rattle of protest arose from the Shanaq. As one, hissing and clacking, they swarmed after him.

That left just one way open: the way straight ahead, on down into the gorge.

Cursing, Rock took it.

CHAPTER VI

FROM THAT POINT FORWARD, the chase was born of nightmare. On Rock ran, and on, racing full-tilt through the grim, labyrinthine windings of the City of the Dead.

He lost track of the times he tried to reach the towering monoliths along the skyline - - the strange, graven obelisks that marked the boundaries of this empire of the slain.

For always, just as he felt the first thin scarlet surge of victory, a shout would rise; and there ahead would rush in view another hooded figure - - claws bared, weapons ready, evil alien face contorted in its eagerness to drink his blood.

So, once again, he'd turn back; find some new cleft to escape by, even thought it led him deeper still into the maze.

Dull-green, mottled, the cliff-like walls of serpentine began to close in on him like the jaws of some giant vice. They threw back the sound of his own footsteps till it seemed the echoing reverberations must surely burst his ear-drums. Carved figures of the long-dead leered down at him, their arms outstretched, as if gloating at his plight even while they welcomed him to their own ranks.

Twice, he nearly plunged into yawning pits half hidden in the shadows. A dozen times he stumbled over skeletons shoveled from their resting places by despoiling Shanaq. Dust rose beneath his feet in choking clouds. He could smell the acrid tanaline in it; taste the calcium and salt of crumbled

bones.

He knew now that he'd never leave the secret city; knew too all hope of reaching Tom was gone.

Yet still he ran, and still the hooded aliens followed, through what seemed miles of arteries and alleys. Now he crept along the narrowest of ledges; now he pelted headlong across a broad parkway. He crawled through windows, scrambled up stairways; sought in vain to hide in the must and dust of long-forgotten tombs.

And always, always, the dead were with him . . . the leering, jeering, stone-carved, skull-faced dead.

They, and the Shanaq.

Then, at last, there came the time when Rock could run no longer -- the final, fearful moment when, regardless of all will or odds or hazard, his flaming lungs and strength-drained muscles demanded that he make a stand.

Sobbing, barely able to move, he slumped into a narrow, slot-like crevice hacked in the rock beside an ornate tomb.

A cry went up from his pursuers. Like ravening wolves, they sped forth from first one gap, then another -- closing ranks, ringing Rock in.

But because a spark of life still glowed within him; because he could not even yet give up his

dream of finding Tom, he forced himself to clutch and lift a head-sized chunk of serpentine, jagged and heavy, in one last token effort at defiance.

The Shanaq were on him in that same moment.

The first lunged in fast, chortling ghoulish glee.

Rock smashed the serpentine square into the hideous alien features. The hooded monster died.

It gave the creature's fellows pause. Hissing, muttering, they drew back for a moment.

Then, boldly, one whipped out a long, slim-bladed dirk; moved forward cat-footed, guard up, in a knife-fighter's wary, dangerous stance.

Numbly, Rock stared down at his empty hands.

The alien's features twisted. He feinted; drew back; paused.

Instinctively, Rock crouched and braced himself for the blow that would cut him down.

Closer, now; closer. The Shanaq still moved warily, as if determined not to share the fate of the skull-shattered alien on the ground.

Another step . . . another . . . Rock held his breath.

The hooded monster lunged. Rock's muscles screamed. Without volition, his hands came up, fists clenched. Blindly, he clubbed a blow at his adversary's face; hoped

it would land before the keen knife pierced his heart.

And then, of a sudden, he was stumbling, sprawling on hands and knees in the thick, sifting dust.

It took him a moment to realize what had happened: his blow had missed; he'd spilled forward.

And, incredibly, he was still alive.

Slack-jawed with shock, he looked this way and that, searching for his foe.

The hooded alien just wasn't there.

Too, the other Shanaq were shifting now; muttering, drawing back. It was plain to Rock that they were as baffled as he.

HE STRUGGLED to his feet, breathing hard.

It was the wrong move; he knew it even as he made it. For the aliens, it came out as defiance, a challenge.

As one, two charged towards Rock from opposite angles.

He jerked back into the slot in the rock by sheer reflex.

But he might as well have saved his energy. No retreat was needed, nor defense, either.

The lunging Shanaq reached a point six good feet from him.

Whereupon, they vanished.

A tumultuous hissing rose from the remaining aliens. They backed

away, moving off into the rabbit-warren of alleys and passageways from which they'd come.

In seconds, no sign of them remained.

Rock stood very still. He had a strange feeling that if he so much as breathed, the whole scene before him would burst like a bubble and he'd find himself already dead.

Abruptly then, a voice close to his ear said, "David Rock . . ."

A woman's voice.

Rock spun round -- and found nothing.

The voice, still from no visible source, spoke again: "I am your friend, David Rock. You need have no fear."

Narrow-eyed, frowning, Rock tried to place, identify, the speaker.

Though there was something vaguely familiar about both tone and manner, it certainly wasn't Narla talking.

That narrowed the field. He'd met only one other woman on Kaldei Zagad: the dark woman, the enigma.

What had her name been? -- Tirelle?

The voice spoke again: "Turn left, David Rock. Then walk straight ahead till you reach the three-pillared tomb opposite you."

Still pondering, Rock obeyed.

"Now, left again. Climb the stairway to the rear of the tomb."

It was a steep stair. The higher Rock went, the less sure the footing became, until he was dragging himself up a virtually vertical ladder hacked into the dull-green stone.

But at least it didn't stop. That was its advantage. Already, Rock was higher than he'd been at any time since entering the City of the Dead.

Now, looking out through a tall slot close beside the hand-holds, he found that with every upward step he could see more of the strange microcosm into which he'd stumbled. The carvings, the crevices, the canyons - - they spread below him like some weird relief map sprayed with green.

Then, suddenly, he rounded a sharp turn and at last topped the ladder. With an effort, he pulled himself onto the smooth, weathered cap of a narrow pinnacle that rose straight up from the floor of the bowl that housed the City of the Dead.

Again, the voice: "Wait, David Rock . . ."

Rock became aware of a faint humming. It grew with every passing second; focused on him; pressed in about him so close and concentrated that his nerves began to rub raw.

Simultaneously, the scene about him dimmed, till the dull green of

the serpentine turned grey, and the clefts and carvings lost their form.

The next instant he felt a perceptible jerk. The last traces of the tomb-world vanished. Rock seemed to hang suspended in mid-air.

Another jerk.

Instantly, a new scene resolved, sharp and clear as only reality can be: a room, this time - - clean, well-lighted, low of ceiling; a laboratory, perhaps, from the benches and equipment.

The voice said, "You may move freely now, David Rock." It, too, was sharp this time, with no air of illusion.

Rock pivoted.

The woman called Tirelle stood close at hand, near a control board where two techs labored. Her scarlet lips parted in a smile as Rock's eyes met hers. "Welcome, my friend . . ."

Slowly, thoughtfully, Rock nodded. "Thank you."

The woman's smile faded. "Is something wrong?"

"I don't know yet." Rock continued to study her. "Maybe you'd better tell me more, so I can decide."

"But what is there to tell you?" Tirelle gestured vaguely. "We saw you were in trouble. We saved you."

"Oh?" Rock still held his tone

noncommittal.

"Really, that's all." The woman spoke a trifle faster now. Almost too fast. "Except for the device, of course. It's rather clever. It lays down a cohesive, light-absorbent barrier that gives the effect of sudden invisibility. Since it's both startling and uniquely useful, we've kept its development quite secret till now. But in your case, we decided to use it. As a matter of fact" - - a quick gesture of amusement - - "you were your own worst enemy, you know. We'd have picked you up much sooner if you hadn't insisted on staying active. The way you ran, we just couldn't get a reading on you. And once you plunged into those narrow gorges - - well, it was simply impossible to focus close enough to pick up living tissue without damage. It didn't matter with the Shanaq, of course, because we felt free to kill them. But you . . ."

Another gesture. The woman's voice trailed off.

"I see," Rock nodded politely.

TIRELLE'S SMILE grew just a trifle stiff, as if lacking spontaneity. Her dark eyes seemed shadowed. "Well, then - -"

Rock interrupted: "There's just one question I'd like to ask you."

"Of course," Tirelle murmured. But her smile grew even stiffer.

Rock asked bluntly. "Why'd you do it?"

"Why - -? Oh . . ." The woman's hands moved as she groped and fumbled. "Why, you're human, of course. And with the Shanaq harrying you - - surely that's enough reason."

"For you, maybe. Not for me." Cold-eyed, Rock leaned forward. "You see, I've been long enough on Kaldei Zagad to learn a few things; and one of them's that these hooded horrors run roughshod over humans. So why was I picked out to be saved? I'm a stranger, not even of your system. What difference did it make to you whether I lived or died?"

A sharp look. The woman's voice went, chill and brittle. "Are you questioning my motives?"

Rock came back fast and flat: "Yes, of course." And then, impatiently: "Well, what's the story? Why'd you do it?"

The last trace of Tirelle's smile vanished. Her dark eyes flashed. "I don't answer insults."

"Then I'll tell you." Rock laughed harshly. "One way or another, you want me to do something for you."

Imperiously: "Oh?"

"Considering I have nothing whatever material you could want, it's the only possible answer. And the funny thing is" - - again, Rock

laughed - - "I'd like to go along with you. I'm that way about people who save my neck, whatever their motives. But only if I know the facts, and what I'm getting into."

"And if I won't tell you?"

"Then I don't play." Rock made it blunt. "Blindman's buff isn't my game."

"I see." Tirelle stood very straight - - on the surface, inflexible, unbending. But for all her show of hauteur, her eyes grew calculating.

Rock matched her manner.

For a long moment they stood thus, deadlocked. Then, abruptly, Tirelle said, "Perhaps you're right."

She turned as she spoke. "This way, please."

Wordless, Rock followed her.

The room to which she led him was small and bleak, unfurnished save for two long, tank-like cases that stood waist-high in the center of the floor.

Tirelle moved to the nearest; flicked a switch.

Light flooded from an aperture in the top of the tank, close to one end. Stepping nearer, Rock discovered that it came through a transparent viewing-plate set into the metal case. He bent; peered into the casket; stiffened.

Narla lay prone within - - face pale, eyes closed, still as death!

A chill ran through Rock. Holding himself steady with an effort, he crossed quickly to the other case and threw its switch.

Again, light.

His brother Tom lay corpse-quiet inside the coffin-like case.

Slowly, carefully, Rock straightened; turned to Tirelle.

She met his gaze squarely, but her look told him nothing.

"They're alive - - ?" Rock asked. He couldn't keep his voice from shaking, just a little.

"They're alive," she nodded coolly.

"Then what - - ?"

"I wanted you to see them. Otherwise you might have been - - hasty."

"Hasty?" Rock stared. "Hasty about what?"

"About your response to my proposal." Tirelle's voice still was cool, yet Rock thought that now he caught a sudden undercurrent of tension and excitement in it. Slender, graceful, she moved away a few steps, then turned and once more faced him. "You were right, of course. I saved you because I want you to do - - something."

"And you want it bad enough to grab Tom and Narla, hold them hostage for my performance. Right?" Rock demanded curtly.

Tirelle's hands moved. "Really, it won't hurt them. All this" - - a

gesture to the coffin-like cases - - " - it's just a mechanical hypnotic system. They'll wake as soon as anyone opens up the tanks - -"

SHE BROKE OFF ABRUPTLY. Her eyes met Rock's once more; and this time they didn't fence or hold back.

She said, "I don't know why I feel the need to hedge this way where you're concerned. Ordinarily I'm a very direct person." A moment's pause. "Actually, the whole thing's very simple. Not all of us on Kaldei Zagad care to die for Stregor's greater glory. As a matter of fact, we'd prefer to see him neatly interred. At the earliest possible moment."

Another pause, longer this time. "So - -?" Rock prodded finally.

"Isn't it obvious?" The woman's slim shoulders lifted. The dark eyes measured Rock. "You're to kill him, of course. After which you and your friends will be free to go and do as you please."

Now it was Rock's turn to pace the floor a few steps. Then, frowning, he rubbed his chin.

Tirelle's lip curled, ever so slightly. "Surely you're not afraid - -?" she murmured.

"Perhaps I am." Rock clipped his words. "From what you haven't told me, I have a feeling that I should be."

The woman's long, sooty lashes lifted. "From what I *haven't* told you - -?"

"About why you need to drag me in to do it." Rock scowled at her. "I don't know how many people on this planet hate Stregor enough to drop him. From what I've seen, there must be quite a few of them. But he keeps right on breathing."

"Yes, yes; of course." Tirelle came close; eager now, scarlet lips half parted. "You see, the trouble is, we cannot find him. Because he knows and fears us, he's hidden himself out of our reach."

Rock lifted a doubting eyebrow. "Time should solve that problem."

"But that's the trouble! We haven't time! We can't wait!" Tirelle's slender hand pressed against Rock's tunic. He could not but be acutely aware of her loveliness, even when in the same moment the fierce intensity of the dark eyes made his spine prickle. "You see, the other worlds in System Andronaxis - - the worlds the battle satellite bombarded - - already, they've sent in their ultimatum: either we deliver Stregor to them, dead or alive, within three cycles, or they'll lay down another blast-wave on Kaldei Zagad. Three cycles after that - - another. And so on, until we give them Stregor."

"I see." Rock nodded slowly.

And then, narrow-eyed: "But that still doesn't tell me why you think that I can find him, when all of you have failed?"

It was the wrong thing to say. Rock knew it even as the words came out. The woman's eyes went as blank as if an opaque shutter had snapped down behind them. Her lips set in a swift, stiff, artificial smile.

"Believe me, there are reasons." Even her voice had changed. "You'll understand when our techs instruct you . . ."

"And . . . you have only three cycles?"

"Barely two now. Then -- another blast-wave."

Bleakly, Rock wondered what lay behind the smile, the voice, the blank eyes.

Death, probably. That seemed to be the dark beacon guiding the destiny of this whole planet.

Tight-lipped, he masked his thoughts, his feelings. When he spoke, the words came smooth and easy; almost casual: "Good enough, if that's the way you want it. Certainly I don't have any trouble understanding the pressure on you."

A pause, while he stretched. Then:

"I'll have to rest first, though. Probably for the biggest part of a cycle. Otherwise I'll be walking

around too blind to do you any good."

For an instant he thought she was going to reject it. He could see her breasts rise as her breathing quickened. Her lips started to form words.

Deftly, he remarked, "That's the trouble with fatigue. It sneaks up on you. And this is one job where you can't afford to have me fail."

The emphasis on the final sentence did it. Tirelle's lips changed to different words even while he watched.

"Very well," she said, a trifle thinly. "One of the techs will show you to a room. Then, when you've rested --"

-- I'll go into action," Rock promised.

It was only a small omission, he decided, falling in behind the tech, that he hadn't specified to Tirelle the course he intended his action to follow . . .

CHAPTER VII

THE SLEEP WAS HARDLY the best Rock had ever known. Dreams kept shifting over into nightmares, and it seemed there was hardly a moment when he lay unaware of his own weariness and aching muscles.

But in spite of it all, it rested him; and when at last he fought

his way up from a cataclysmic battle deep in the bowels of a spaceship that somehow, simultaneously, contained the City of the Dead, it was with the knowledge that he could no longer delay pursuit of the course which he had planned.

Stumbling up from his cot, he crossed to what appeared to be an electron-fountain spray and turned it full-blast onto his head.

The tingling radiation made his blood race. In two minutes he felt better than he had in all the time since he'd first set foot on Kaldei Zagad.

Now a blue-uniformed technician-guard appeared and inquired if he had need of any service.

Rock made a face and held a hand over one eye while he appraised the man and noted that the two of them were about of a size.

"I can indeed." He gestured. "Take a look at this lid, will you?"

The unsuspecting tech came close; peered at the eye.

Rock hit him in the pit of the stomach, hard.

The tech's wind went out of him with a rush. He doubled over.

Rock brought up a neatly-timed knee to the point of the man's chin.

Unconscious, the tech crumpled to the floor.

Two strides, and Rock was at the door. Warily, he peered up and

down the corridor beyond.

He saw no one.

Pivoting, he returned to the limp-bodied tech, stripped him of his distinctive uniform, and lashed him beneath the cot.

Another thirty seconds, and he himself wore the blue uniform.

Swiftly, then, he left the room and moved down the hall in the direction of the chamber where Tom and Narla lay. Twice, he passed open doorways into rooms where other blue-uniformed men worked. But he pulled his cap low and kept his face averted, and no one seemed to notice him.

Now he neared the cross-corridor that led past the hypnotank chamber. Deliberately, he slowed his pace, let his head go forward, and masked his face with his hand under the pretext of rubbing his forehead. Then, taut-nerved, he turned the corner.

A guard stood by the door that was his destination.

Careful to give no sign of uneasiness or hesitation, Rock closed the gap between them.

Idly, the guard glanced at him. " 'Smatter, Kolchin? You got a headache?'

Rock made an incoherent, numbling sound that covered the time it took him to get within striking distance. Then, spreading thumb from fingers, he dropped his hand

to armpit height.

It bared his face to the guard. The man went rigid. "Hey - -! You're not Kol - -"

Rock stepped in fast, driving the U formed by extended thumb and stiff fingers straight to the man's throat, his Adam's apple.

The guard made a gagging sound, speech cut off in mid-breath. Before he could recover, Rock struck again -- the heel of the hand to the point of the other's chin.

The guard's head snapped back; hit the door-facing with a dull thud. His knees buckled. He started to slide to the floor.

Catching him beneath the armpits, Rock kicked open the door to the hypnochamber and dragged the man inside. Then, breathing hard -- more from excitement than exertion -- he heeled the door shut and hauled his victim over to the coffin-like tank that held Tom.

The lid of the thing, he discovered, was secured by simple latches. Unsnapping them, he swung up the case's top.

Apparently counterbalanced, it lifted easily. Simultaneously, within, both a faint, flickering light and pulsing, humming sound cut off.

Heart pounding, Rock looked down at his brother, still lying unmoving on the cot-like frame. Then, stiff-fingered, he felt for Tom's pulse.

As he did so, Tom's eyes opened. Unfocused vagueness faded, replaced by swift comprehension. "Dave . . ." Eagerly, the younger man pulled himself to one elbow. Words came in a rush:

"I knew you'd make it, Dave! I knew it! Stregor may have things nailed down in System Andron-axis. But Dave Rock's still a rougher, tougher customer than Stregor ever dreamed of being!"

In spite of himself, Rock couldn't help but chuckle.

But only for a moment. Then, tight-lipped, he gripped his brother's shoulder. "Save it, Tom. Our time's in seconds. What I need to know is, what's this woman Tirelle trying to set me up for?"

BRIEFLY, he sketched in what had happened, one eye on the door as he talked.

By the time he finished, Tom was already nodding grimly. "You're due for murder, Dave," he clipped.

"For murder - -?"

"Nothing else. Stregor's already lost the Gate of Conquest. It went down in the first blast-wave, smashed to rubbish." Tom stepped across the fallen guard to the second hypnotank and began unlatching the lid. "That's how Tirelle caught Narla and me, you know. Her people took over the

whole Mendak base for a while in the confusion."

Frowning, Rock moved to help his brother with the metal casket. "What's all that got to do with me?"

"Plenty." Tom laughed without mirth. "Thank's to the way you cut loose the battle satellite ahead of schedule, Stregor's already lost his chance to invade System Sol.

"He can't hope to fight clear here either.

"That leaves him just one out, one last escape hatch: the original gate, the one we came through."

"You don't need to tell me any more," Rock clipped. "I get the picture. To save his skin, Stregor's planning to duck through that experimental gate, jump clear from system Andronaxis to Gordon Pennap's Venus laboratory. The only thing that might foul him up would be for one of us to help his enemies follow him clear back to our own system."

"Correct," Tom nodded. His lips thinned. "Which is where Tirelle comes in."

"Of course." Rock laughed harshly. "She wants me for a sitting duck, a target. Odds are she has a pretty good idea where Stregor's hidden. So she plans to parade me through the area, in hopes he'll come out to kill me -- at which point, she can grab him."

Tom frowned. "But why you, Dave? That's the only thing that bothers me. Why didn't she use me to bait her trap, or even Narla?"

"You're too valuable to her, obviously." Rock's mouth twisted. "You see, Tom, I'm already good for just one thing: to kill or be killed. But you're insurance. If anything goes wrong; if this scheme misses -- why, then, Tirelle figures you're still available to build a new gate."

"The way she's playing it, though, obviously she thinks she holds all the pieces: using you as hostage, she can pressure me into helping her trap Stregor. Then, if that fails, she'll use Narla to try to squeeze you into setting up a new gate."

Tom grimaced, shuddered. "That kind of ruthlessness --" He broke off.

"It's the kind you need, in System Andronaxis," Rock came back with grim humor. "Just accept her as the ultimate in adaptation -- the end distillation of mass paranoia."

His brother stared at him with a strained expression. "Dave, how can you talk that way -- as if it were just a matter of academic interest that this woman's planning to see you murdered?"

"What else is it but academic? Tirelle certainly doesn't think of

it as personal." In spite of the tension, the danger, Rock found himself feeling suddenly expansive, almost thoughtful. "You know, Tom, that's probably the biggest single difference between us. I understand people like Tirelle. You might even say I appreciate them. That's why I've survived so much trouble . . ."

He paused; shook off his mood, and gestured towards the hall door. "Let's not press our luck too far, Tom."

"Right." His brother finished unlatching the hypnotank. From his expression, Rock had a feeling the younger man was glad for the change of subject.

Together, they lifted the case's lid. In seconds, Narla was rising shakily -- violet eyes wide and frightened, ash silver hair rippling about her shoulders.

Tom caught her; pulled her to him.

Rock interrupted their embrace: "Sorry. We've no time for that." He bent over the downed guard. "Come on, Tom. Give me a hand with this fellow."

Lifting him, they stretched him out on the frame Narla had occupied, and closed the hypnotank over him.

Now, quickly, Rock stripped off the blue uniform he'd taken from the other guard and smoothed out

his own rumpled garments.

TOM AND NARLA WATCHED him with curious eyes. When he'd finished, he threw them a reckless grin. "We're going out of here, I hope," he explained. "But the mechanics may take a little doing. If I'm not back in ten minutes, you're on your own."

Boldly, then, head and shoulders back, he strode out into the corridor.

Turning into the first room where he saw techs at work, he accosted the nearest: "Where's Tirelle, friend? I'm looking for her."

The tech's eyes bulged. Hastily, he slid down from his stool. "This -- this way, please . . ."

More corridors, more doors, more rooms.

And then, Tirelle.

She looked almost as startled as the tech had at the sight of Rock. The words she spoke were well-nigh incoherent: "What -- how did you come here? The guard --"

Rock made his face a blank. "Guard --? What guard?" And then: "I woke up. With time so short, it seemed like a good idea to get started."

It was hard to analyze the look in Tirelle's dark eyes at that moment. Partly, Rock decided, it was contempt, that any man should be so stupid to act thus. Yet withal,

there remained an overlay of wariness and caution, as if the woman could not quite accept her own perceptions.

He said, "I assume you've laid some plans -- narrowed down the area where Stregor may be, at least. Otherwise I can't see any chance at all of finding him."

"Yes."

"And of course I'll need transportation. I'm sure you've taken care of that?"

Again, the woman nodded.

"Where is it?"

"Directly above us." Tirelle smiled faintly. "As a matter of fact, it's one of Stregor's own anti-gravs, a one-man unit. It's on the roof here, camouflaged."

"Good enough." Rock made a show of briskness. "I'm ready to go, then, just as soon as I've taken another look at my brother."

Tirelle stared at him incredulously. "A look at your brother - -?"

"That's right." Rock clipped his words now. "You see, Tirelle, I'm going into this business on your terms, without argument or question, even though all logic tells me not to. In turn, I feel as if I have a right to be adamant -- quite adamant -- on such a minor matter as taking a last look at Tom. So let's not waste time debating about it."

Obviously, Tirelle's bafflement

was now complete. But after a moment she spoke into a sound unit.

Two guards came at once. Tirelle said, "Take this man to the hypno-tank room and let him look at the prisoners."

Rock smiled crookedly. "I'd hoped you might accompany me. Just in case I might want authorization to open the tanks to make sure my brother's still alive."

Tirelle's scarlet mouth grew petulant for a moment. Then her slim shoulders lifted in a shrug. "Very well."

Together, the four of them, Rock and Tirelle and the two guards, walked to the hypnochamber.

At the threshold, Rock stepped aside and bowed politely. "You first, my lady," he announced in a voice slightly louder than necessary.

Tirelle threw him a nettled look and stepped past him into the small, bleak room.

The next instant Tom's arms shot out from behind the door and encircled her in a vise-like bear-hug. His hand clamped across her mouth.

Rock jumped back to the far side of the corridor, clear of the guards; flung words at them like lances: "Shut up! One sound from either of you, and that woman dies!"

The guards' faces went stiff with panic. For the fraction of a second they stood frozen, paralyzed by shock and their own indecision.

Roughly, Rock caught each of them by a shoulder and shoved them on into the hypnotank room before they could get their wits about them.

Narla already held Tirelle's light-pistol. She backed the two guards up against the wall while Rock closed the door.

Now Tom spoke: "Next step, Dave?"

Rock grinned. "We go out." He turned to the guards. The grin vanished. "You two are going to take us."

Mutely, the pair exchanged glances.

Rock gestured to Tirelle. "All right, you! Give them their orders!"

THE HOT HATE her look radiated could have melted ice-floes. But when Tom cautiously took his hand away from her mouth, she spoke without prompting: "Very well. Take them to the antigrav on the roof."

Rock laughed in her face. "Do I look like that much of a fool?" he demanded.

The dark eyes smouldered. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that antigrav's already

set up as a target," Rock answered tightly. "It probably carries more locator units than a battle fleet."

The woman gave no response.

Rock clipped: "When I said we were going out, I meant it. And that means out on ground level, by a route that puts us where we'll have a fighting chance to escape. That's the kind of orders I want you to give this pair."

"Why should I?" Tirelle's laugh was curt and scornful.

"For more reasons than I can name," Rock retorted. Abruptly, he moved close to the woman; let her throat feel the pressure of his fingers. "Because it may save your own neck, for one thing. For another, because I hate Stregor just as much as you do, and by letting me go you'll be putting me on his track, even though the terms and tactics will be mine instead of yours."

Silence. A long, echoing moment of silence.

Then, bitterly, Tirelle said, "So be it. I'll concede the round." And then, eyes suddenly flashing: " - - But not the game, David Rock! Not ever, the whole game!"

Rock's lips twisted. "Tirelle, we understand each other!"

He shoved back his brother's imprisoning arms from about the woman as he spoke; caught her in his own and pulled her to him:

kissed her full on the scarlet lips.

She stood as if carven in stone for an instant -- passive, unmoving.

Then, furiously, she came to life, all of her: cursing, kicking, clawing.

Rock laughed aloud. Pinioning her arms, he lifted her, pushed her bodily down upon the frame of the empty hypnotank, and slammed shut the cover.

When he checked a moment later, after securing the latches, her eyes were already glazing as the pulse of the machine threw her into deep hypnotic slumber.

Then, behind him, Tom said, "We're ready, Dave."

"Right." Rock straightened; faced the guards. "You heard Tirelle's orders. Now back them up with this: if you get us clear, you'll be free to return and let her out of this tank. If you don't, you'll die, both of you, and the star-sprites only know how long she'll lie here."

He let it go at that. Wordless, the guards moved with him and Tom and Narla, out of the chamber and down the hall beyond.

The route they took proved surprisingly short and simple. Bare minutes away from the tank-room, they climbed a ramp out into the hazy indigo light of the distant blue sun.

For Narla, orientation was a matter of seconds, despite all the blast-wave's wreckage. She pointed to distant conical structure. "The gate -- it's just beyond that . . ." Her voice broke. Shoulders shaking, she buried her face against Tom's shoulder.

Rock nodded with grim satisfaction. "It had to be close. Tirelle wouldn't chance time loss or a distance factor. Not when it came to keeping tabs on Stregor." He shoved Tom and Narla forward.

In less than an hour, the three of them were scrambling over the last heaps of rubble that separated them from the building that housed Pennap's experimental gate.

The place lay in ruins now, one whole end sheared off by Stregor's foes' explosives. Moving more cautiously than ever, the trio crept closer. Half-a-dozen times they froze at some twisted beam or broken block they took to be a reconnoitering Shanaq. Again and again vague, unidentifiable fragments of sound convinced them that they were discovered.

Then, at last, they reached the open, gutted end of the building . . . moved on through it. And still no attack, no smallest trace Stregor had ever been here.

Rising, Rock crossed in taut silence to the gate itself.

Miraculously, it stood intact, un-

damaged. The tubes still glowed. The protuberant ball of black light beyond the frame hung like a patch of misty midnight.

And still nothing happened.

Cold-eyed, again Rock surveyed the scene about.

Nothing hostile, nothing dangerous. Not even anything suspicious.

It all seemed too good, too easy. Fortune's smile was too warm with friendship.

Pinpricks of tension began to run up and down Rock's spine. He had a sudden premonition that he stood on the threshold of imminent disaster.

Yet he dared not allow mere thoughts of that sort to immobilize him. Such could be worse enemies even than Stregor.

ANGRY AT HIS own forebodings, his raw-nerved tension, he gestured impatiently to Tom and Narla.

Rising, Tom stepped to the gate's control board and checked dials and indicators. When he swung round, his eyes held a shadowed spark of eagerness. "It's working, Dave. Everything's in order."

"Then we may as well push on through before something else breaks here." It irked Rock that his voice showed such a tendency to quiver. He stepped back. "I'll

go first."

Three quick strides. Three strides, across a hundred thousand light-years.

Three strides, from Kaldei Zagad, System Andronaxis, to Venus, System Sol.

And now, he was out of the momentary blackness, back in old Gordon Pennap's laboratory once more.

Quickly, he glanced around.

As before, the room was bare and empty, save for the gate's glowing frame.

Rock tiptoed towards the room beyond, the workroom.

As he did so, feet whispered behind him. He turned just in time to see Narla step away from the frame. Tom followed, close on her heels.

A little of the tension went out of Rock.

"All right," he said, in a voice somehow too loud. "Let's get out of here before our luck breaks. I don't want any questions from Security at this stage."

Narla laughed nervously. Tom made a wry mouth.

They all moved towards the door.

Then, from the workroom, came a sound of other feet.

Instinctively, Rock went into a crouch.

As if synchronized to his movement, two figures came through the

doorway towards him.

Grim, sinister figures . . . the alien figures of a pair of Shanaq guards.

Now they saw Rock . . . stopped short.

But others of their kind were pressing through behind them, pushing the first two out of the way. Six - - eight - - a dozen of them, they spread out across the room.

It was one of those utterly incredible moments, better known to life than fiction. For once, Rock stood completely baffled, with not the slightest idea of what to do.

The same feeling seemed to possess the Shanaq. Like him, they hung back in uneasy silence.

Then, more footsteps. A man, a human, moved into the doorway.

If Rock had felt shock before, now he was reeling. For the face that looked in at him from among the aliens was Gordon Pennap's flushed, familiar visage!

Or was it?

Rock groped, trying to sift through his own thoughts and feelings . . . striving for some conclusion, some cornerstone on which decision might be built.

For the face was indeed the face of Gordon Pennap. Yet somehow it didn't fit. The shoulders - - the torso - - what was it - -?

Abruptly, the man spoke: "I thought you'd come, if I just

waited."

And now Rock knew: the voice - - it wasn't Gordon Pennap's.

The man went on: "The best part is the element of surprise. On Kaldei Zagad, you were prepared for trouble. While here - -" - - he laughed contemptuously - - "well, look at the way you've let yourselves be trapped!"

A numbness crept through Rock. His whole body felt clammy-cold and damp.

It wasn't as if he didn't know - - only that, somehow, he had to make the final test; be certain.

In a voice barely recognizable as his own, he said, "All right. The game's played out. Take off the flesh-mask."

"Of course, if you insist." The man in the doorway laughed softly. "Not that it will do you any good. You don't need me to tell you that you'll have to die."

He lifted his hand as he spoke and slowly, deliberately, stripped away Gordon Pennap's features.

Then his hand dropped, and he stood before them in his own face - - the face Rock knew would be there.

It was Stregor.

CHAPTER VIII

FOR THE FRACTION of a second they stood there, all of

them, friend and foe alike, so paralyzed by shock as to be incapable of movement.

Then, with a roar, Rock leaped forward -- driving in, lunging for Stregor's throat.

But his shout broke the spell that gripped the others. Shrieking, flailing, hooded guards hurled themselves on him. Claw-hands clutched Rock's arms. Fetid breath choked him. Scaly arms clamped round his ankles, jerking him off balance.

The next instant he was toppling, falling, haunted by a last glimpse of Stregor's pale face, alive now with triumph.

From there on, it was chaos -- a nightmare maelstrom of arms and legs and blows and crushing bodies. Rock hammered, kicked, smashed with his elbows. When a knife slashed his ribs bone-deep, he twisted and rolled over onto the weapon, the better to tear it out of the guard's hand.

Then, at last, it was his. Heedless of din and stench and pain and pressure, he writhed and rolled sideways, bringing the blade up in a tight arc.

Grey blood gushed. A hooded guard jerked away, keening.

Rock surged to his knees -- panting and sobbing, slashing and stabbing. Of a sudden, the smell of death seemed to rise round him, sharper even than the stench of

alien bodies. More grey blood spewed over him -- from a dozen wounds, now; a hundred. The guards scrambled back -- screaming, slipping, stumbling.

Yet still Rock pursued them, hewing and hacking. Like some grim, scythe-wielding reaper, he cleared a circle around him. When one of the creatures whipped up a light-gun, Rock shoved forward another to take the charge. Those who fell -- savagely, he stomped on them; reeled with strange exhilaration, a berserker's madness that only more blood, more death, could sate.

Then -- all at once, it seemed, though it could not really have been so -- there were no more guards within reach.

Lurching, staggering, Rock stared wildly this way and that -- searching for more foes, more food for his knife.

It was in that instant he once more saw Stregor.

The Emissary of Death to System Andronaxis stood on the workroom threshold now -- and he gripped a light-gun in his hand.

He saw that Rock saw him, too; that was plain, for a sudden smile flickered on the thin, cruel, pallid lips.

Then -- coolly, deliberately -- the hand that held the light-gun came up. The long, slender finger

tightened on the trigger.

Somewhere behind Rock, Narla screamed. He heard Tom cry out -- choked, incoherent.

Rock threw his knife as the light-gun blazed.

The blade went wide by a yard; thudded off the wall haft-first.

But for a single flickering instant while the razor-edged, blood-spattering steel slashed through the air, Stregor's hand wavered. The light-gun's narrow beam lifted just a fraction.

Shoulders hunched, head down, arms hugged in, Rock dived under it. Like a ball of flesh, he hit the floor and, somersaulting, flipped completely over.

His feet struck close by Stregor's ankle. Before the tyrant could jump back, Rock threw a scissor-kick that sent the other staggering.

Rock was upon him, then.

The light-pistol went with the first charge. After that, it was hand-to-hand -- savage, bone-crushing combat.

Rock drove the heel of his hand up under his foe's chin; felt a surge of fierce triumph as the other's neck-muscles gave and the high-crowned head racked slowly back.

Only then, fingers were in his own eyes, a knee gouging his groin.

Twisting away from the knee,

Rock bit Stregor's thumb to the bone.

In the same instant, also, he let his whole weight go floorward.

Stregor's thumb snapped like a pencil. He fell atop Rock, dragged down bodily.

They lay there thus for a taut, writhing instant. An elbow stabbed to Rock's belly. A heel hammered his temple. Fingers clutched for pressure points. Thumbs dug at his jugular.

Desperation rode Rock like a nightmare. With a tremendous effort he heaved himself half up, and over, so that his whole weight fell on Stregor. His brain reeled with pain. The room had gone dim and foggy, shot through with streaks and splashes of colored light so bright he knew they could not possibly exist. His muscles, too, all at once seemed limp as water, and it came to him with a certain vague element of wonder that perhaps he'd lost too much blood -- that the early knife-slash along his ribs might yet defeat him.

Which gave him a choice: quick victory, or none at all.

SAVAGELY, HE BROUGHT the top of his head forward, hard and violent, full into Stregor's pale face.

For an instant the tyrant's grip loosened.

Rock jerked up the other's head and smashed it back against the floor with all his might.

Spasmodic clawings.

Tearing free, Rock rolled wide, away from the other, and lurched to his feet.

Stregor tried to rise also. For a brief moment he balanced on hands and knees.

Then, abruptly, the strength seemed to go out of him. Like a marionette when the strings are cut, he spilled forward onto the floor, flat on his face. His breath came in short, hoarse gasps.

Rock stared; and now, for the first time, he saw the queer, lopsided look that had come to the high-crowned head.

Before Rock could even move, then, the raw, shallow breathing stopped; the Emissary of Death to System Andronaxis died.

But there was no time for either grief or triumph; for now, the handful of Stregor's remaining guards made for the glowing framework of the space-bridge in a rush, heedless of the light-gun Rock's brother Tom held on them. Two died under the weapon's beams. The rest vaulted through the gate into the blackness and vanished.

Simultaneously, heavy fists thundered on the laboratory workshop's door. A muffled voice bellowed, "You, Pennap! This is Security!"

Open up! Let us in!"

In spite of fatigue, Rock jerked around.

He could see panic stiffen his companions' faces in the same instant.

"Security - -!" Tom whispered in a numbed voice. And Narla echoed, "Dave, what will you do?"

What, indeed?

Weariness came to Rock in that moment; a weariness over and beyond all the physical fatigue that had gone before. Of a sudden he felt old, heartsick, defeated . . . broken of body, racked of soul.

What to do: when had that not been the question for him, where Security was concerned? How did you live a normal life, after the powers in command decided that "hero" was another name for "menace"? Which way did you turn, when even relationship to or contact with you amounted virtually to a crime?

Tom spoke with obviously-forced eagerness: "Look, Dave, we'll fight it! Even Security can't hold that Ganymedan break against you -- not when we tell them about the Gate of Conquest, and Stregor, and System Andronaxis. They won't have any choice but to see things your way --"

Rock laughed aloud.

"Dave . . ." Tom looked hurt, reproachful. "I'm only trying - -"

"Don't try. It won't buy you anything but trouble."

Tom's face flamed. "What do you mean, trouble? No one's going to penalize us for honesty. We haven't done anything - -"

Rock turned on him savagely. "You're a fool, even if you are my brother. The minute Security finds out about all this, they'll clamp a System-level 'Secret' label on it. You and Narla - - they'll slap you into protective isolation. You'll never breathe free air another day as long as you live!"

Like an echo, the voice in the hall roared, "Hurry it up, Pennap! You can't stall us forever!"

Rock said, "You see? There's no time to waste." He bent as he spoke; scooped up an abandoned light-pistol. Then, limping over to the place where the knife with which he'd fought clear lay, he retrieved that weapon too and secured it in his belt.

Narla's violet eyes grew big and frightened. Nervously, she smoothed the silver-blonde hair back away from her ears. "What - - what are you going to do, Dave?" Her voice shook.

"What can I do?" Rock spat. "I'm going back, that's what. Back to System Andronaxis, the one place Security can't follow. At least, they can't if you stall them a little while - - maybe change the gate's

grid adjustments so they have to call in experts to re-set them. Then, once I've smashed the Andronaxis unit - -"

Tom scowled. "Now, wait a minute - -"

"Wait, nothing!" Rock lashed. "This is your chance too, you idiot! Your only chance! If Security finds us here together, they won't even listen to explanations. But if I'm gone, you can blame this all on Stregor. Just claim Pennap called you in to do a rush job. Then, after you got here, it turned out it wasn't Pennap at all, but this stranger you'd never seen before, wearing a flesh mask. He held you prisoner, made you rework some of these gadgets. You didn't even know what they were for. And at the finish these aliens" - - Rock gestured to the fallen guards - - "came charging in from points unknown, captured Stregor-Pennap, and then took off again with him when the Security boys started hammering. You and Narla are the only survivors, and you're both innocent bystanders who haven't the slightest idea of what all the bloodshed's about."

HE BROKE OFF sharply; glowering at his brother. "Well?"

Tom squirmed. "Please, Dave! I - - I don't know . . ."

"You don't know!" In two

strides Rock was upon him, jerking him up short by the front of his tunic. "You chitza, even if you don't care about yourself or me or Narla, think what this means to System Sol!"

"To System Sol - -?" The younger man stared.

"Of course!" Rock shoved him back so hard he reeled. "You weren't stupid enough to imagine Stregor was a freak, were you?"

"Why - - well - -"

"Believe me, he wasn't. His kind are effects, not causes. They grow out of sick worlds, hostile worlds, paranoid worlds where ruthlessness is at a premium." Rock glared; tried to ignore the now-near continuous pounding arid shouting from the hall. "Why did Stregor want to leave System Andronaxis, do you suppose?" And then, answering his own questions: "Because the competition was getting too rough, that's why. There were too many others like him, breathing down his neck and hunting a soft spot where they could sink a knife."

He turned on Narla. "Isn't that true?"

Numbly, she nodded.

Rock laughed harshly. "You see how it stacks up, Tom? Enough of those hooded horrors of Stregor's got back through the gate, here" - - he gestured to the glowing frame - - "to pass the word round

that there's a soft new system ready for looting, open to all comers. So what does it matter that we destroyed the Gate of Conquest? With this for a model" - - again, he gestured - - "there'll be others built, believe me! Our only chance is for me to wreck the frame at the Andronaxis end - - tear it up, smash it so bad no one, scientist or otherwise, can ever build it back or reproduce it."

Tom looked at Narla. He opened his mouth as if to speak, then closed it again. The muscles along his jaw worked.

The pounding on the door echoed louder now; the angry voice more imperative: "Open up, you slazot! We know you're in there! I'll give you just thirty seconds before I break the door down!"

Tom's jaw took on a new set. He turned to Rock. "All right, then, Dave, if that's the way it's got to be. But you can't carry it alone. I'm going with you."

A warmth crept through Rock. Half chuckling, he gripped his brother's shoulder. "Sure, Tom. I want you to."

And then, throwing shock-animation into his face and voice and leveling a quivering finger: "Tom - - ! Look! Quick!"

His brother's head snapped round, eyes following the fingers.

Rock punched in the same in-

stant - - a short blow, hard, with weight behind the fist, straight to the hinge of the jaw.

Tom's eyes went blank. Knees hinging, he fell like a pole-axed huecco.

Narla gave a frantic little cry and dropped to her knees beside him - - lifting his head, cradling it in her lap.

Outside, in the hall, the bull voice roared, "All right, then, rack you! We'll break it down!"

Something hit the door with a tremendous crash.

Rock smiled down at Narla. "Take care of him, girl."

It was doubtful if she even heard him.

Pivoting, Rock caught dead Stregor by the collar and dragged him quickly through the glowing frame that led to System Andronaxis. Again, he stared out of the gutted building that housed the second gate, surveying the smouldering désolation.

Even the cries of the birds were muted . . .

So this was where he'd come, the place he'd chosen to live out his days, be they few or many. A sick world, a hostile world, a paranoid world, as he himself had phrased it. A world that cared only for power and blood and booty.

Rock's stomach twisted. Of a sudden he wished he'd died instead

of Stregor.

But this was no time for brooding. There was still too much to be done, all of it urgent.

Like delivering Stregor's corpse to his foes, before they launched another blast-wave.

Tight-lipped, Rock spun the gate's dials.

Which cut off all danger of Security pursuit, at least.

And that was one thing to be said for Kaldei Zagad and System Andronaxis. Here, there'd be no compounds, no 'protective isolation'.

It reminded him a little of the old days, even. The days out in the far, wild reaches of The Belt - - raiding the Malyas, guiding down Chonya ships against the Skrii.

The nights, too: nights red with blood yet echoing laughter. Nights at Banzokol and in Ceresta. Rogek gas and rocket fuel and thes-wood torches. Kabat to drink and wenches to share it.

And the whole wide span of System Sol to roam through.

The span in System Andronaxis would be even wider: two suns . . . sixteen planets . . . forty-four satellites . . .

All with a taste for blood and trouble.

No more Security, no more Gany-medan advance base compounds.

Perhaps, too, the woman called

Tirelle had survived the current cataclysm.

What more could a fighting man ask?

Rock laughed aloud. Of a sudden his wounds and weariness were as nothing. Quick, welling eagerness filled up the void within him.

Kicking loose a metal bar from the rubble, he stepped over to the glowing frame that was his last link with System Sol . . . sole remaining bridge to his past and the worlds he'd left behind. With brisk efficiency, precision, not even hesitating, he set about his task of

demolition. The panels crashed down. The great tubes shattered. Component units fused and burst asunder.

At last, the job was done. No more in this era would men span the void by means of Gordon Pen-nap's incredible space-gate.

Boldly, then, David Rock strode from the shattered shell of building, out into the warmth of the pale green sun.

He didn't even bother to look back. Already, his eyes were on the road before him, and the new worlds he yet would conquer.

THE END



LATHER
SCHEFFY

Twelve Hours To Blow!

by

Robert Silverberg

Getting a spare tube for the transmitter on Phobos should have been easy—unless someone on Mars was waiting with your death sentence . . .

I DON'T LIKE being shot at, and I don't think I'll ever learn to. I have two different sets of reactions to it: when I'm armed, I shoot back; when I'm not, I run like hell. And this time, I wasn't armed.

Syrtis City, Mars, is normally a pretty quiet place, but things can happen there, nonetheless, so I wasn't actually too shocked when a shot from a K-gun spanged off the wall of the building I was walking by. When that happened, I ducked low and sprinted for the corner. Someone behind me yelled: "Hey! You! Caldwell! Halt!" Just like that; four words, barked out one at a time—but fast.

My name isn't Caldwell and never has been, so I kept on running. Two more shots tore at the plexisteel wall before I made it to the corner and ducked around it.

There was a big green ground-car parked across the street, with the circle of the Martian Guard engraved on the side. I headed for it. If someone wanted to kill me, I needed Guard protection.

The cop saw me coming and rolled down the window.

I was just about to say something when I found myself staring into the muzzle of a handgun.

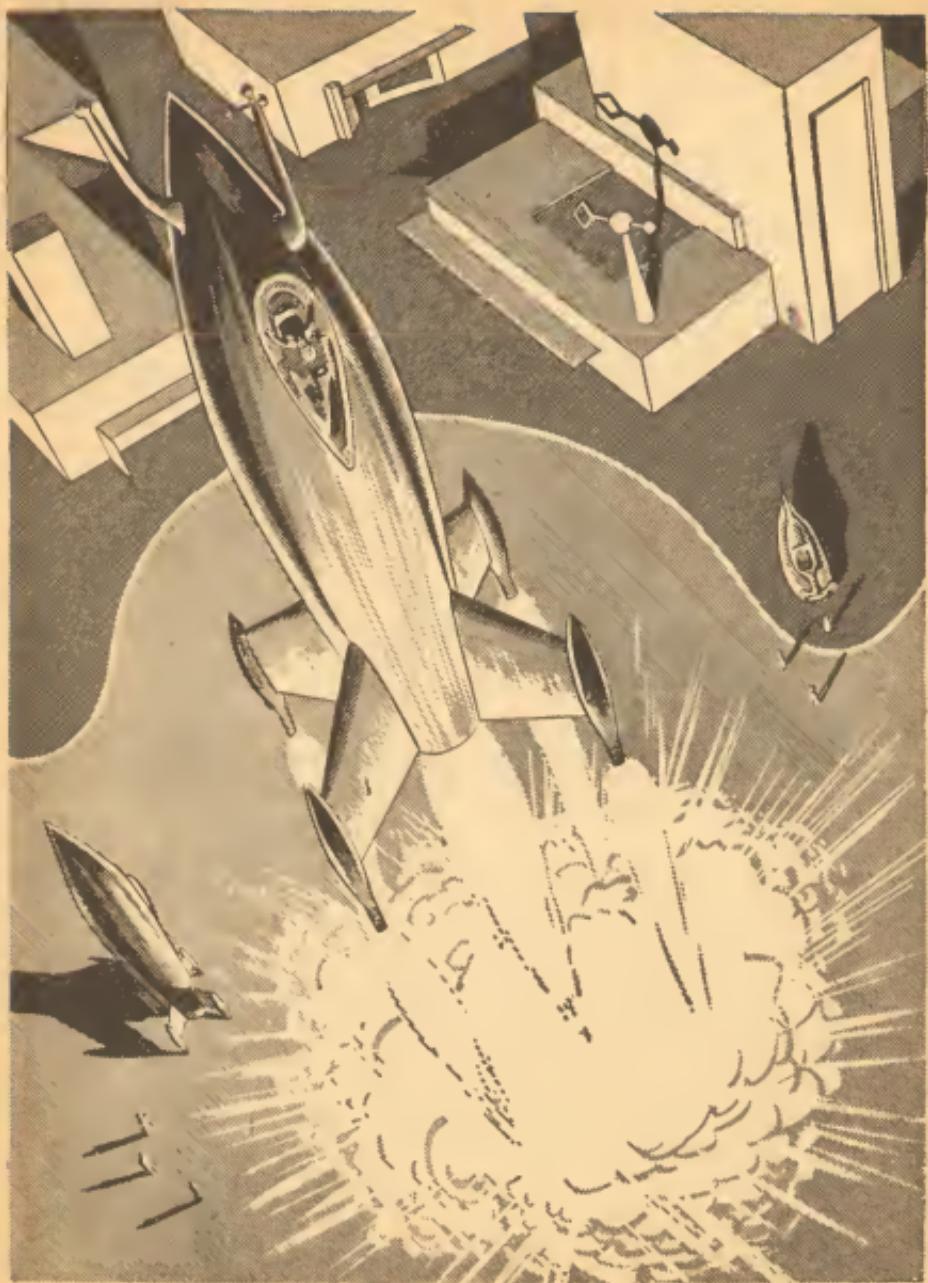
"All right; hold it, Caldwell," said the cop who was holding the gun.

I came to a fast halt and raised my hands above my head; I know when I'm licked.

"My name isn't Caldwell," I told him.

The gun didn't waver. "Maybe not, but we'd better check just to make sure."

I heard footsteps pounding up behind me; it was more Guardsmen.



"How'd you get him, Sam?" one of them asked.

The Guardsman in the car said: "He ran right up to me. Must not have seen that this was a Guard car."

I was getting sore now. "The hell I didn't! Somebody back there took a pot shot at me, and I ran to you because I thought a cop would help me."

One of the cops was patting me down, making sure I wasn't armed. He said: "That was us shooting, Caldwell; you were ordered to halt."

"Why did you shoot first and holler afterwards?"

"We didn't shoot until after you started to run," the cop said laconially.

There was quite a crowd beginning to gather. Syrtis City only has a population of fifty thousand or so, but it looked as though they were all within a block of us. They gaped like dying fish while one Guardsman slapped magnetic cuffs on my wrists and another one flipped open the identity packet he'd taken from my pocket.

That was what I'd been waiting for; there was no need to argue over a case of mistaken identity as long as I was carrying a Solar Government identity pocket—those things are forgeproof.

"Your name Van Martin?" the cop asked.

"Yes."

The cop didn't say anything more about it. He just put the identity packet in his tunic and opened the door of the Guard car. "Get in."

I didn't argue. I might as well go down to the Guard Building with them; I figured it wouldn't take more than a few minutes to clear up the mistake.

THREE AND A HALF HOURS later, sitting in a comfortable, but confining jail cell, I was trying to figure out what the devil had happened. I had obviously been framed—but by whom? And how could I prove it?

I had seen the photostat that had been radioed in from Earth. It was a *wanted* circular for a man named Barton Caldwell, wanted on Earth for murder, grand larceny, armed robbery, kidnapping, and counterfeiting of Solar Government currency.

The only trouble was that the circular had *my* picture and fingerprints on it!

To make matters worse, the Guard, after checking my identity packet, had proclaimed it a forgery! And, after I'd looked at it myself, I had to agree with them. It *was* a phoney, and not a very good one, at that.

It didn't figure. It just didn't figure. Something was screwy

somewhere, and I had to find out where. So I sat on the edge of my jail bunk and did some fast and furious thinking.

I'd left Earth a week before—early in January—for Phobos, the inner moon of Mars. Phobos is the relay station for interplanetary radio from Venus and Earth, coupled with Phobos Alpha and Phobos Beta, the space stations which travel around Mars 120° away from Phobos itself, making a triangle of stations that cover all of Mars.

I'm a cryogenecist. That's a nice, fancy word, but in case you think I'm going high-hat, I'll tell you that all it means is that I'm an expert on low-temperature work.

And by low temperature, I mean temperatures around absolute zero—about 273° below zero Centigrade. Funny things happen to ordinary metals at that temperature. For instance, lead—plain, ordinary lead—becomes a superconductor when it's cooled too close to absolute zero. In fact, it does such a good job of conducting electricity that it's possible to start a current running in it and then shut off the current supply—and the electricity will keep on moving through a ring of lead. Round and round and round, without stopping. And it will allow tremendous amounts of current through at a

very low voltage.

So you can see what a cryogenecist is good for around a communications station. With superconductors and superrefrigerators, there's no need to fiddle around with power losses in a super ultrahigh-frequency radio transmitter.

I had landed my ship on Phobos and made my way to the relay station. The technician in charge—a tall, sandy-haired, lanky guy by the name of Channing—greeted me at the airlock. He was the only man there; there's no need in keeping more than one man at a relay station that damn near operates itself.

"Glad to see you, Martin," he said, after I'd shucked off my spacesuit.

"Glad to be here," I said. "What's the trouble?"

He gave me a grin. "The trouble with being a trouble-shooter is that you're always looking for trouble."

"Next you'll be saying: 'Never trouble trouble till trouble troubles you.' Come off it, chum; what's wrong?"

"Refrigerator blew," he said. "I've had to throw a cooper busbar the size of your leg into the circuit. Come and see."

He led me down into the interior of the installation, and I took a look.

One of the high-power circuits

had been diverted through a huge copper busbar—inefficient, but the only recourse in a case like this. The refrigerator, which kept the regular conductor at about a tenth of a degree absolute, had gone hay-wire, and had lost all its helium. It just wasn't working. And while it wasn't working, extra power had to be used, extra wear and tear on the system. My job was to fix the refrigerator.

"Righto," I said. "I'll get to work on it."

It was hours later that I came out of the ref section. I probably looked as though I'd slept in an oil drum.

"She's going," I told Channing. "It'll take about twelve hours for it to get down to operating temperature, and we'll have to do some fast changeover at the crucial point, otherwise, the generator will overload the transmitter and blow every tube in the place."

Channing nodded. "Good. Our power losses have been terrific. I was afraid we'd have to close down, and that would be rough."

I knew what he meant. Interplanetary Communications wasn't the only company in the Solar System. If communication between Mars and the other planets were to be shut off for any length of time, some other company could bid for the job. And there was one company that was ready to grab

us off anytime we got lax with communications. And that company was Ledland Inc.

Ledland was a Martian outfit, operating in Syrtis City. They wanted the Phobos operation so bad they could taste it; it meant money and prestige, and Sam Ledland wanted both. He was just waiting for a chance to grab the franchise from I. C.

Actually, of course, it would take more than a temporary shutdown to give Ledland the contract; Channing was kidding when he said that the refrigerator's being out of order would ruin us. It would take a major catastrophe to shake I. C. from Phobos.

"I only need one more thing," I said. "Get me your spare Z9M9Z tube. I want to put it into the circuit ahead of the superconductor to regulate the heating."

Channing frowned deeply. "Gosh, Martin, I don't have one. I burned out the regular and had to put in my only spare. You'll have to get a new one."

"That's OK with me; there ought to be plenty on Mars."

He nodded. "Fine. It'll take you a few hours to get down and back. I can't leave, of course; I have to watch the beam transmission."

I nodded. "Good enough; I'll see you."

I HAD LANDED AT SYRTIS City and made my way straight to the Interplanetary Communications warehouse. I told them what I'd come for and got only a blank stare in return.

"Z9M9Z tube?" The clerk shook his head. "I'm sorry, Mr. Martin; no can do. The last shipment from Earth was taken by the Ledland Company. They have the Martian Network, and the Martian Governor commandeered the whole shipment for the new stations. Maybe you could get one from them."

I shrugged. I hated to buy from our competitors, but if that was the only -- that was the only way.

So I walked down to the Ledland offices.

Sam Ledland was a big man, fat and greasy-looking, with little piggish eyes. I didn't like his looks, but I was polite, and so was he.

"A Z9M9Z tube, Mr. Martin? Well, we're rather short of them, but I suppose I could let you have one. Sit down, have a drink, make yourself comfortable."

We were in his private office, a fairly plush-looking room with plenty of comfortable furniture and a built-in bar. He walked over and mixed me a drink, handed it to me, and then called someone over the intercom, telling them to bring up a tube.

I took a sip of the drink. "This is very kind of you, Mr. Ledland."

"Not at all, sir, I—"

The sentence was cut off in the middle, and Ledland seemed to jerk a little. I shook my head; I felt a little dizzy for a second, then everything was okay.

I finished the drink, took the tube, paid for it and went out onto the street. And that was when someone had taken a shot at me.

It made sense; I could see what had happened. Ledland had doped the drink with *vardis*. *Vardis* isn't easy to get hold of, but I'd seen it used before. The mind just blanks out, putting the victim in a catatonic paralysis for a few minutes. The effect doesn't last long if it's a light dose, and the victim doesn't even realize he's been unconscious unless something is moved or changed while he's under.

As soon as the drug had taken effect on me, Ledland had substituted a phoney identity packet for my own. Then he'd poured out the rest of my doped drink and refilled it with good stuff. Very simple and easy.

The rest of it followed logically, too. The Martian Guard had been called, and when I left the office, they started to close in. Then either Ledland or one of his men had taken a pot shot at me from the office window—to make me run. I'd sailed neatly into a trap.

The reason for the trap was

obvious; Ledland didn't want the Phobos station repaired. If he'd refused the tube, it wouldn't have done him any good; I'd have jerry-rigged another circuit using other tubes. Not as efficient, perhaps, but just as usable, and I'd be able to get a Z9M9Z eventually.

Trouble was that the repairs had already been made. The tube was useful, but not absolutely necessary. I glanced at my watch. In eight hours the refrigerator would have the tube down to zero temperature and - -

And then it hit me. I could see the whole plot now! In eight hours, the lead busbar would become a superconductor, and the current would be circuited around the copper. The resulting power input would blow every tube in the station!

FOUR OF THOSE HOURS were up before I could do anything. Asking—even pleading—with the Martian Guard did nothing. They weren't going to let me out of their sight. I tried to explain, and they wouldn't listen. The guy who was patrolling the corridor paid no attention to me, and neither did any of the others who walked by. I was a voice crying in the wilderness.

Finally, after four hours, a squad took me out of my cell and led me to an office. Behind the

desk sat a powerfully-built man with gray at his temples and a colonel's insignia on his collar. He was introduced as Colonel Parkhurst.

He waved me to a chair. There were no guns being pointed at me, but two Guardsmen were sitting quietly nearby, their hands never very far from their holsters.

When I sat down, Colonel Parkhurst said: "Caldwell, why don't you come clean?"

"I'm not Caldwell," I said flatly. "My name's Van Martin." I explained who I was all over again.

A sardonic smile appeared on the colonel's face. "Come now; you don't expect us to believe that sort of junk. That identity packet of yours is as counterfeit as the money you were pushing on Earth."

"Look, Colonel," I said, "That isn't my packet. I never saw it until your man jerked it out of my pocket."

The colonel's smile grew even more sardonic. "No? Well, well, well. And how did that come about?"

I told him. I gave him every detail. And as I talked, I could see disbelief written in large letters all over his face. I wasn't getting anywhere.

"You don't believe a damned word I've said," I told him.

"Oh, come off it, Caldwell," he

said sharply. "We've got a flyer on you. It's your photo, your prints, your retinal patterns on that flyer. You're listed in the official files as a criminal wanted on three planets. Do you expect us to believe some cock-and-bull story like that in face of the identification evidence?"

I didn't say anything. He was right. I couldn't expect him to believe a word I said.

Colonel Parkhurst sighed. "All right, Caldwell. You came to Syrtis City for something; we want to know what it is. Maybe a little zombie drug will do the trick."

"That's illegal," I said.

"It is on Earth—not on Mars. Mars is a frontier planet, and we have to use methods that wouldn't apply on Earth."

One of the guards went over to a wall cabinet and took out a hypogun. The other got a hypnoprobe light and set it up in front of me. I knew then what I could do—if it worked.

The hypnoprobe light looked a great deal like an old-fashioned television screen, with a glare-light tube in place of the picture tube. As soon as it was set up, I stood up and pushed it away.

"Look here!" I said. "You haven't any right—"

"Sit down, Caldwell!"

I was staring down the barrel of a gun in the colonel's hand.

I sat down.

But I'd done what I intended to do. I'd turned the intensity knob as I pushed the machine—turned it so hard it had broken and twisted it on over to a low setting. It was actually set for highest power, but the knob no longer showed it.

I sat still, not moving.

One of the Guardsmen reset the hypnoprobe light, the other got the hypogun ready to use. Then the hypnoprobe light was switched on. I closed my eyes and threw my arm across my face. Even so, I could see an intolerable glare of light that seemed to sear through my eyelids and burn my retinas.

I threw myself out of the chair and kicked the blazing light. A gun spanged, and the hypnolight exploded in an even more intense glare.

I opened my eyes. Things were a little foggy, but I could see a hell of a lot better than anyone else in the room.

"Don't anyone move," I said. "I have a gun."

They'd all been blinded by the light. They couldn't see a thing, and they couldn't know that I didn't have a gun. They froze, staring blindly into space.

I walked over to the nearest Guardsman and took the hypogun out of his hand. Then I put it against his arm and fired. The

charge of zombie drug went into his bloodstream without leaving a mark on the skin. The other Guardsman and the Colonel got the same treatment.

"Sit down, all of you." They sat—the colonel sat back in his chair, the Guardsmen sat on the floor. "As soon as your vision comes back, say so."

Zombie drug is nasty stuff, and I hated to use it. When a man is full of it he has no mind of his own, no will power at all. He'll do what you tell him and answer any questions you want to ask—truthfully, but sometimes misleadingly.

"I can see," said the colonel.

I thought he'd be the first one; he'd been a little off to one side when the glare hit. Within a couple of minutes more, the other two spoke up. I was all set to go. I'd have to move fast; zombie drug didn't take long to wear off. I figured I had half an hour at the most, and probably fifteen minutes at the least.

I took their guns, opened the butts, and took out the charges. Then I shoved them back in the holsters.

"All right," I told them; "here's the plan." I outlined it to them very carefully.

A FEW MINUTES LATER, four men walked out of Mar-

tian Guard headquarters and climbed into a groundcar. The colonel led the group, and the two Guardsmen, looking keenly alert, flanked me on either side. The groundcar had a Guardsman driver. I didn't like the fact that he was a fully-awake Guard, but there was nothing I could do about it. The whole operation had to come off like clockwork, just as though it were a regular part of the whole scheme.

I could have made the colonel order the driver out and replace him with one of the drugged Guardsmen, but that would have been dangerous. In the first place, the protocol of the Martian Guard didn't allow for such substitution; the driver would have thought something was funny. In the second place, a man under zombie drug hasn't got good driving judgment; he won't even turn a corner unless he's told to. And obviously I couldn't drive the car myself.

"Take us to the spaceport," said Colonel Parkhurst. "We'll deliver this man to the Earth police."

"Yes, sir," said the driver. The turboelectric engine hummed, and the car started moving. We headed toward the airlock of the Syrtis City dome.

We got through the lock easily, and headed out across the reddish sands toward the spaceport. Outside the pressurized cabin of the car

was the thin, oxygenless Martian air.

It took nearly ten minutes to get to the field, and I was getting fidgety. If one of the Guardsmen or the colonel himself started to come out of it, I'd be a dead duck.

Following the colonel's orders, the driver pulled up beside my ship. "Here we are, sir," he said.

And the colonel let out a strangled noise. He was coming out of the influence of the zombie drug!

I didn't have any time to waste. I jerked one of the Guardsmen's guns out of its holster and slammed the driver and the colonel across the side of their heads. They collapsed into the seat, and I climbed out of the car, heading for my ship.

A shot slammed against the airlock door as I opened it. I realized what had happened; the Guardsmen in the back seat had come out of it.

I jumped inside. I'd had to hold my breath as I ran; the air on Mars isn't exactly breathable outside a dome, and I didn't have time to put on a mask. As soon as the door of the airlock swung shut, I turned on the pumps.

I damned near blacked out before there was enough air in the lock to let me breathe. I flung open the inner door before the cycle had actually been completed and collapsed on the floor inside.

It took half a minute or so for me to get my senses back, and all I could think of was that refrigerator on Phobos—approaching zero.

As soon as I could get my breath, I scrambled into the control chamber and strapped myself in.

Then the radio blared: "Caldwell! If you take off -- "

I didn't bother to listen. I knew they couldn't have done anything yet that would stop me. I jammed my finger down on the takeoff button and my ship roared towards the sky.

I HADN'T BOTHERED, with worrying about takeoff times; there hadn't been time for that. I'd simply climbed spaceward and to hell with targets. That meant that I'd have to orient myself after I got into space.

Phobos makes a complete revolution of Mars in about ten hours. I didn't know where Phobos was at this instant by memory, so I looked it up as soon as I was clear of the atmosphere. Phobos is nearly six thousand miles from Mars, but that's measured from the planet itself. I was a couple of thousand miles up in a fairly short time, but a check showed me that the satellite was on the other side of the planet. That meant a long ride around Mars.

I only hoped I could make it in time.

I found out soon enough that I didn't have the time. It didn't take long for the Guard to follow me up. By that time, I was a long ways from where I'd taken off, but they spotted me pretty quickly with radar and headed for me.

There was a little trick I'd figured out years before. I knew it would work, but I never thought I'd have to use it. But now, if ever was the time to put it into operation. After all, I'm not an expert on electronics and low-temperature physics for nothing.

I checked my own radar screen and figured I had about twenty minutes before the Guard caught up with me. It wasn't enough time, really, but it would *have* to be enough.

The first thing I had to do was take the automatic computor out of the autopilot. That meant that I'd have to fly the ship myself, but I hadn't any other choice. Then I hooked the whole computor brain into the radar system and rigged the relay banks against the detector circuits so that the output could be individually phased against the input.

By the time the Guard ships—two of them — came close to me, I was ready. They were almost within firing range by the time I got back to the controls and was ready with my haywire rig. The only trouble was that I didn't dare use

it yet.

I'd been heading around the planet in a pretty slow orbit, moving toward Phobos—but that had to be changed. I spun the ship away from Mars, heading outwards. The Guard ships hadn't expected that maneuver, and they were a little slow on the uptake. Shells burst silently in space around me as I changed course.

I gave the little speedster full power and headed for Deimos, the outer moon of Mars, nearly fifteen thousand miles away. I gunned that ship for all she was worth, fifteen gravities of acceleration squeezing me against the pads. My breath came in slow gasps, and my body felt as if it weighed a ton and a half—which it did. I blacked out.

My hand left the throttle when that happened, and the drive acceleration dropped to a single gravity. When I came out of the blackout, a glance at the radar screen showed that the Guard ships had lost plenty of space. They were a long way behind—but was it long enough? I eased the throttle forward again, building my acceleration up to an uncomfortable, but not unbearable, four gravities.

The Guardsmen weren't fools, and they had damned good ships. Slowly, inexorably, they gained on me. I was in a jam, and I knew it. I eased the ship up to five gees of acceleration, but the Guardsmen

came on. How much could they take?

How much could *I* take?

Deimos finally came into view as my skew curve of an orbit took me towards her. I checked my time against my velocity and flipped my ship, end-for-end, at just the right time. I slammed the throttle all the way forward.

The resulting acceleration was something like being hit on the head with a sledgehammer.

WHEN I COULD SEE again, I was close to Deimos—practically sliding past it, a hundred miles or so from the surface. The Guard ships, thinking I was trying to escape, hadn't slowed down in time, and were way beyond the second moon. But my detectors showed that their radar was still spotting me.

I dropped toward the surface of Deimos—fast. And then, just as I was about to land, I pushed the switch on my gadget. Then I headed away from Deimos as fast as I could comfortably stand it.

At a few miles, a dead black spaceship is totally invisible. The only way it can be spotted is with radar.

But my little gimmick was the answer to that; it returned the radar waves exactly in phase with the outgoing pulse in such a way that the transmitter and the re-

ceiver of the Guard cruisers interfered with each other. In other words, their radar screens looked perfectly clear as far as I was concerned. I was invisible to radar.

As I headed away, I hoped that the Guardsmen would think what I wanted them to think—that I had landed on Deimos. Let them look—and enjoy themselves.

I made a geodesic bee-line for Phobos. I was running out of time.

Phobos isn't a very big hunk of rock, as far as moons go. It's only five miles in diameter. I didn't want anyone at the relay station to see me, so I landed out of sight beyond the horizon—two hundred meters away.

I put on my spacesuit and headed toward the station. But when I came close, I didn't go to the airlock; I crept around to one of the windows.

Sure enough, there was Sam Ledland, big as life and uglier.

He was all by himself, putting on a spacesuit. I turned my head inside the fishbowl helmet and looked around. As I expected, there was a ship nearby. I could see the oddly-slanted nose sticking up from the jagged horizon a little ways away.

Since it looked as though Sam Ledland was going to leave, I decided to wait for him at the airlock. At the same time, I wondered where Channing was. I hoped I hadn't made any error in my deductions;

I hoped he was still alive somewhere inside the station.

I glanced at my watch. And realized, with a shock, that I had less time left than I imagined. I'd said twelve hours when I started that refrigerator, but it's impossible to judge that accurately. It could possibly reach the critical temperature within fifteen minutes! And then—*blooey!*

I prayed hard, hoping that Sam Ledland would open the airlock soon. And while I was praying, I was making my way around to the lock. When I got there, I stood and waited.

When Ledland came out, I could see a big, happy grin on his porcine face. It was more than I wanted to take at the moment, and I didn't want to hold myself back anyhow. He didn't see me when the outer door opened, but it wasn't long before he felt me. I let him have a stiff one right in the solar plexus.

And I got a surprise.

I'd supposed that Sam Ledland was all fat, and I was wrong. Underneath the blubber, he had a good, solid sheath of muscle.

When I hit him, he fell back in surprise, but he didn't double up. When he saw who I was, he came at me like a bull.

He made a mistake right off the bat. He slammed a fist into my face, forgetting that I was wearing

a helmet. There was plenty of power behind it, and I tumbled several yards under the low gravity of the little moon. But I wasn't hurt, and Ledland was nursing a sore fist.

I leaped for him, launching myself across the intervening yards of space like a bullet. My head slammed into his stomach, and I could feel the breath go out of him. We fell to the ground together, and I gave him another punch in the paunch to make sure.

He was out cold.

I dragged him into the airlock and started the pumps. When the cycle was over, I pulled him inside, unscrewed his helmet, and gave him a slug on the jaw for good measure.

I took his gun from his holster, checked it, and shoved it back in. Then I went over to the communications console board for a few minutes. Suddenly, I heard footsteps behind me.

I turned. It was Channing, standing there with a blank look on his face. He looked from me to the inert form of Sam Ledland on the floor. Then he rubbed the back of his head.

"Somebody slugged me," he said. "What the hell's going on around here?"

I leaned back comfortably against the bulkhead. "Plenty," I said. "Sam Ledland, here, had a little

plan for throwing the whole relay station out of kilter." I explained it to him, step by step. When I was through, he nodded.

"Yeah. I get it. Well, he didn't actually succeed, so there's nothing lost."

"Not this time," I said, "but what about next time?"

"Next time? What do you mean."

"Come off it, Channing; you know damn good and well what I mean! Somebody had to send that phoney message from Earth to the Martian Guard—someone had to slip my photo and prints into the communications circuit. And you're the one."

He could move fast; I'll give him credit for that. He jumped over to Ledland's prone figure and jerked the gun from its holster. He stood up, levelling it at me.

"You're pretty bright, Martin. What else?"

I didn't move. "I don't know the tie-up completely," I said, "but I'd be willing to bet you're in for a nice chunk of dough if this had worked."

"You wanted to wreck the station, but you had to have a scapegoat. You didn't want the blame for yourself. So you break the refrigerator and then set a big busbar across it that will carry the current. Then you call Earth for help."

"You know enough about how these things are fixed to know just how I'd go about it. Meanwhile, you've got no Z9M9Z tubes. What did you do? Junk 'em all?"

He grinned wolfishly. "Go on, pal."

"Naturally, I was the one who had to go to Mars to pick it up. And you'd already sent in that flyer on 'Caldwell', knowing I'd get picked up. If I wasn't arrested as soon as I set down, I'd be turned in by your pal, Sam, here."

"You knew the Guard would hold me for long enough to let the station blow when the lead busbars reached critical. And you would have been as innocent as a baby—the blowout would have been *my* fault. Ledland would get the communications franchise, and I'd get fired. What would you have gotten, Channing?"

"Plenty," Channing said. "I own about half the stock in Ledland's outfit. We knew the only way we'd get the franchise was to sabotage the station from the inside and make it look like an accident. But I couldn't be tangled in it myself because there'd be a hell of an investigation if I teamed up with Ledland afterwards. So I had to be in the clear."

"It almost worked," I said.

"Almost? It can still work. All I have to do is burn you down and then put you in the tube room."

When that blows, you'll be in pretty bad shape. An accident."

He aimed at my head and pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened. I'd already made sure that it wasn't loaded before I put it back in Ledland's holster on Mars.

He threw the gun at me, cursing. I ducked under it and made a jump for him. We rolled over slowly, bouncing across the floor gently in the low gravity. Both of us were trying to get a stranglehold on the other.

He got me up against one of the walls and began banging my head against it. For a second, I saw pretty stars, but I fought him off. I was just about to clout him for good when a voice said—

"All right, you two; break it up!"

It was Colonel Parkhurst. Standing behind him were six Martian Guardsmen.

Channing stood up and brushed himself off. "I'm glad you came here, Colonel," he said. "This

man—"

"Don't tell us he's Caldwell," the colonel said evenly. "We heard everything that happened. We heard your confession and your attempt to kill Martin." He looked at me. "That was clever of you, Martin. We heard everything over the radio."

"Radio?" Channing looked dumbfounded.

"That's what I said. Martin had the radio on, and it spread your confession all over space for a few thousand miles around. That's how we managed to find where Caldwell-Martin was." He gestured. "Take him away, boys."

Then he looked at me again. "That was a nice getaway. I'm glad you're *not* Caldwell."

I started to say something modest, but all I said was "Yikes! The refrigerator! I've got to make the changeover!"

I ran down the stairwell as fast as I could move.

I made it just in time.

THE END

★ *Cloud Chamber Physics* ★

IT is surprising what information can be gleaned from the simplest of instruments. The Wilson cloud chamber, for example, has furnished the most graphic sensory evidence of the existence and iden-

tity of atomic particles.

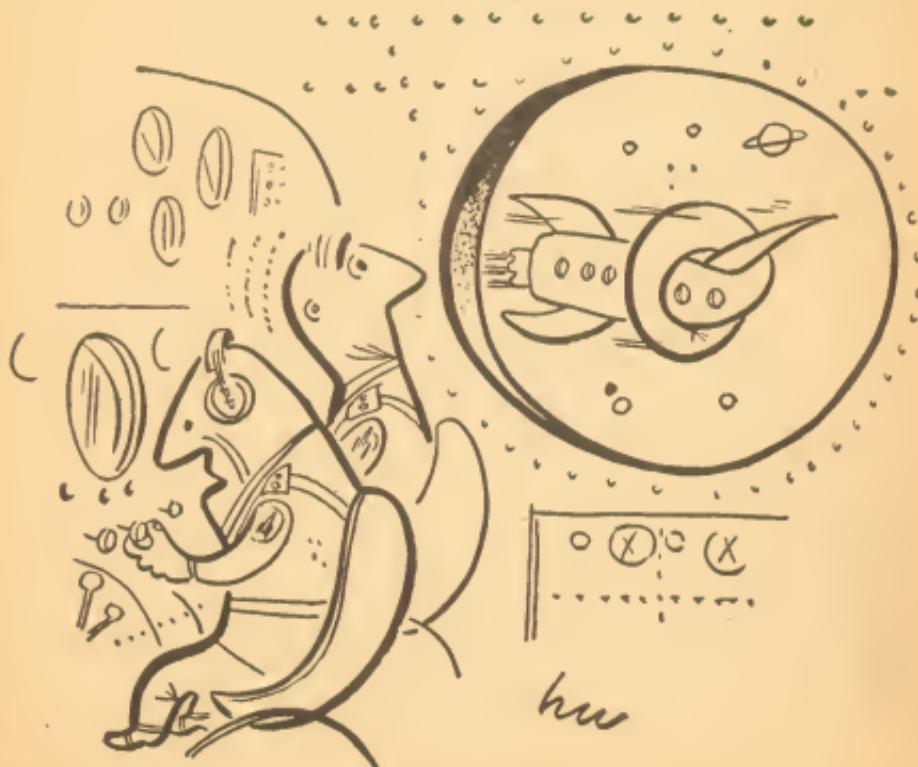
Most recently, in its modified form it has become a standard piece of apparatus in every high school and college laboratory in the world. It consists of a glass jar

filled with alcohol vapor and resting on a cake of solid carbon dioxide, the dry ice obtained from the nearest popsicle peddler. When a flashlight beam is projected through the chamber, the paths of ionized particles can be clearly seen. Since these ionized streaks are caused by high speed atomic particles ranging from neutrons to cosmic rays, direct experience with the sub-microscopic world is had.

The Geiger counter is equally familiar. Long a tool of the atomic

physicist, it is now a common hardware store or department store item, for would-be uranium seekers need it.

Other tools of the atomic physicist have come into common use. Every chemical plant uses a mass spectrograph. The once esoteric oscilloscope is in every home in the form of a TV set. If this practice of transferring things from the atomic labs continues, we may all end up with betatrons in the living room!



"The commander says to turn back —
we've underestimated their strength!"

Little Joe was proud to be a member of a group dedicated to helping aliens take over the Earth. That is, until the day he actually met—

The Man From Space

by

Robert Moore Williams

“**Z**ERWU!” THE PASSENGER in the cab said, his voice harsh.

“Sir?” Little Joe, the driver, answered. “Come again. I didn’t get you.”

“*Zerwul!*” the passenger repeated. His tone of voice was that of a man accustomed to command.

“I . . .” As Little Joe Baskin was starting to say for the second time that he didn’t understand, a sudden startling thought shot through his mind. *Maybe this was one of them!* Little Joe almost lost control of his taxi. Swerving to avoid an El column, he found himself directly in the path of an on-rushing red truck. As he tried to dodge, his mind was still on the thought that his passenger might be one of them.

They came to Earth, in disguise, in very small ships, to accomplish their missions, then returned to the mother ship that never left its dis-

tant orbit around the planet!

So Rikki had taught him. Rikki would love to know that he had picked up one of them in his cab. Maybe Rikki would even give him a promotion for this, make him a big shot in the organization.

Brakes screamed as the truck slowed to a stop. Little Joe swung right and skidded his cab to a halt beside the curb.

“Why in hell don’t you watch where you’re going?” the truck driver yelled. “Do you want to get you and your junk heap smashed flatter than if an atom bomb had hit you?”

“Go soak your head in the lake!” Little Joe yelled. He turned quickly to his passenger. If this was actually one of them, he had to be treated right in every way. No telling what his mission here on Earth might be, but one thing was certain, he would be able to reward those who served him faithfully.



fully while he was here.

"Sorry, sir." For the first time. Little Joe got a good look at his passenger. An electric thrill shot through him at the sight. This *was* one of them!

To anybody else, his passenger might have looked like a prosperous lawyer or a successful executive, but Little Joe felt he could tell by the way his fare carried his head, with the chin held high,

and by the proud, imperial look in his eyes - - - the look of one born to rule - - that he was no ordinary mortal.

"Where can I take you, sir?" Little Joe almost babbled the words. "What can I do for you. Command me! I will obey you." He would have prostrated himself on the ground if he hadn't been behind the wheel of his cab.

The passenger stared at him

from cold evaluating eyes that seemed to look through him and on beyond him into some lost infinity. The color of the eyes made Little Joe think of the dim gray fog that sometimes rolled in off Lake Michigan and enveloped the Loop in a murky haze.

Then his passenger spoke. "This is a test."

"A test!" Little Joe Baskin was jolted to the bottom of his soul. Rikki had said they sometimes came to Earth for the express purpose of testing members of the organization. Tales had been told of these tests and of what happened to those who failed to pass them! Bodies had been found in the lake, dropped there after being snatched to the sky by the anti-grav beams they possessed. "I --- I'll do anything you say, sir. J --- Just tell me what to do."

The cold gray eyes continued to stare at him and through him. Then, as if satisfied, the passenger nodded. "You'll do," he said. "Here, give this to your leader. It contains orders for him!" Leaning forward, he thrust a plain white envelope toward the cab driver. Little Joe took it with trembling fingers.

"*Zerwul!*" the passenger reported. "Pull your clumsy vehicle to a full stop. This is as far as I will go with you this time."

Little Joe, trying to talk and to

pull away from the curb at the same time, hastily put on his breaks. The passenger alighted but paused to lean in at the front window. "This was the first test," he said. "I will see you again, for the second one."

Without remembering to pay his fare, he moved out of sight into the Loop crowds. Shivering, his whole body tingling with excitement, Little Joe Baskin sat at the wheel.

"Aw right, aw right, that's not a cab parking zone. Get it away from the curb!" a cop yelled at him.

"When we take over, you'll change your tune!" Little Joe shouted, gunning the cab.

He felt wonderful. For over a year now, he had belonged to the organization and had listened to all the talk about men from space and had read all the communiques that Rikki had mimeographed for distribution. These communications were of two different kinds, the first, which was distributed to outsiders and which anyone could read, and the second, which was very secret and was distributed only to those in the inner circle. All of this was very mysterious --- and very wonderful to Joe Baskin.

He had been born the youngest in a family of eight in the stockyards district of South Chicago. The midwife who had ushered him

into the world had swatted him on the behind to start life off for him. Since then, everybody else had swatted him too. Men, seeing his hollow chest and his skinny five feet two inches of height, paid no attention to him. No woman had ever bothered to look twice. No matter what he had done, nobody had ever paid any attention to him or believed in him.

To Little Joe, life had been bitter gall, until a passenger had left one of Rikki's news releases in his cab. The words had been pure magic to him. They had opened a new world to him. In the organization which Rikki had built, Little Joe had found a chance to be important.

WHEN THE SPACEMEN landed and took over the Earth, those in the organization would be their right hand men who would tell the president, the governor, the mayor - - - and maybe even policemen - - - what to do. Then Little Joe would come into his own. Then he would be a big shot, for real.

The envelope containing the precious orders hugged tight in the inside pocket of his coat, Little Joe burned rubber off his tires getting to Rikki.

Headquarters was in an old brown stone front that in its day had been a mansion. Rikki had the

whole basement. You could go in at the front door or at the side or at the back. Little Joe had heard hints of a tunnel that led from the furnace room to the old carriage house at the rear at the lot. He had also heard that trusted lieutenants came and went by this tunnel, on secret mysterious errands. Little Joe had never seen this tunnel. He was not a trusted lieutenant, yet. Perhaps this message would win him such an honor. His heart glowed at the thought.

Little Joe used the front entrance. Mabel, Rikki's wife, opened the door at his ring. Although it was the middle of the afternoon, she was still in her wrapper. She also smelled of beer, but the cabbie was too excited to notice this.

"Whatta ya want. The meeting is not till tonight."

"I gotta see Rikki. I got an important message, for his hands alone."

"What kind of a message?"

"From one of them!"

Suspicion showed in Mabel's eyes.

"This message is from one of the spacemen," Little Joe insisted. "I had him right in my cab and he gave me this message for Rikki. I got to see him right away."

His excitement impressed even Mabel. "Wait here," she said. "I'll find out if he can see you."

A few minutes later Rikki him-

self appeared at the door. He was a tall man, in his early thirties, with wary suspicion always in his eyes and a cynical expression about his mouth.

"What's this about a message?"

Little Joe gave him the envelope. Rikki took it and looked at it as if he did not quite understand how the cab driver had come into possession of it. "I'll see you at the meeting tonight," he said. The door closed behind him.

Greatly disappointed, Little Joe went back to his cab. Was Rikki's treatment of him another test? He hoped it was. Otherwise, he would have been even more disappointed.

He spent the rest of the day watching the sky, hoping that a space ship would appear there. When not thus engaged, he watched the sidewalk crowds, trying to spot his passenger who had given him the message. Two cops bawled him out and a truck almost ran him down. None of this mattered to Little Joe. *They had landed! They had used him as a messenger!* Life could hold nothing sweeter than this.

Little Joe was on hand an hour early for the meeting. Mabel admitted him and told him to sit down. Rikki did not put in an appearance. The rattle of a mimeograph in a remote part of the basement indicated his probable whereabouts. The six other members

of the organization arrived. They were few in numbers as yet, but this was because most people simply did not believe in such things as visitors from space. Wait until *they* arrived! Then thousands would throng the organization's doorsteps without being admitted until the insiders were good and ready! Little Joe savored the thought of that day with tremendous yearning.

Rikki had explained that he wanted to keep the organization small. "Only leaders are being trained now." However, in spite of his expressed desire to keep the organization small, he was always urging them to find new members "of the right kind, so we can have bigger quarters." The financial support of the organization came from the members, who contributed a day's pay each week. No member really minded this payment, however. Rikki made them feel so important by talking about the roles they would play when the spacemen landed that they would have contributed two days' pay each week, if he had asked them.

When Rikki finally appeared, it was obvious that something had happened. His face was shining. He rapped for silence.

"They have landed," he said.

THE ROOM BECAME completely silent after he had

spoken. Then questions began. Rikki shook his head firmly. "No! Not another word will I say. But coming days will see great events."

As the others left, Rikki beckoned Little Joe into the back room. "Be at 12th and Spruce with your cab at 11 o'clock tonight. No, don't ask me any questions. Just be there."

"I'll sure do it," Little Joe answered fervidly. If Rikki had told him he was to be transported to the moon this night, cab and all, he would have been ready for the trip.

Spruce Street at 12th was an area where people never seemed to go to bed at night. Here, the glare of Neon lights lit the sky for miles. Pawn shops, all night restaurants, movies. As he parked his cab at the curb, Little Joe saw that the street was as busy as ever.

"Wonder why they picked this spot?" Little Joe wondered. "What am I supposed to do here?" He was on fire with eagerness. Tonight he was going to be tested again. He would pass the test!

Suddenly he saw his passenger of the afternoon. The spaceman was walking out of a big pawn shop. He was carrying a large leather brief case. His manner was completely casual but his alert eyes were scanning the street in both directions. Spotting Little Joe's

cab, he moved directly toward it. The driver hopped out to open the door.

Bang!

The spaceman flinched. Joe ducked automatically. He had heard gunshots before in Chicago and he knew one when he heard it. Turning, he saw the owner of the pawnshop standing in the door. He had a smoking revolver in his hand. As Joe glanced at him, the pawnshop owner raised the gun to take another shot.

"You can't shoot him!" Little Joe screamed. "He's a spaceman. He'll blast you to nothing!"

"Shut up!" the spaceman snarled. He turned toward the pawnshop owner. Something came out from under his coat. Little Joe did not get a clear glimpse of this but he knew it was a weapon of some kind. Light flared from it.

The owner of the pawnshop turned white. His body looked like the sun, so bright that it hurt the eyes. He screamed, once, a high-pitched keening sound that rolled along Spruce Street in a way that set jumping the heart of everyone who heard it. Not a person who heard this sound but knew intuitively what it meant - - - death.

The pawnbroker sprawled backward into the door of his shop.

The spaceman pocketed his weapon. He stepped into the back seat of the cab. Little Joe jumped

behind the wheel.

"Are you hurt? Do you want me to take you to a doctor?"

The spaceman was slow in answering. His fingers explored the back of his coat. They came away smudged with red. He stared at them from a face that was beginning to twist with pain.

"The bullet struck me," he said.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Take me to your headquarters."

Little Joe slammed the cab into gear. As he got away, a siren had already begun to scream in the distance. In his rear-view mirror, he saw the flashing lights of a squad car pull to a halt in the street in front of the pawn shop.

The spaceman was looking back. "Get some speed out of this crate," he ordered.

Little Joe stepped harder on the gas. His body was bathed in sweat but his soul was filled with elation. He did not know why the pawnbroker had been blasted but probably there was some good reason for it. Pulling the car to a halt in the alley behind headquarters, he jumped out and opened the door.

THE SPACEMAN KEPT a tight grip on the big brief case as they went past the carriage house and into the backyard. Little Joe wondered what was in it. Plans for the big landing that was com-

ing? A model of the secret weapon like the one the spaceman carried?

Who was the pawnbroker? A renegade who had tried to betray them? A fool who had gotten in their way? Joe rang the bell at the rear basement door. There was no answer.

"The fool is asleep," the spaceman said. "Wake him up."

The cab driver pounded on the door. A light came on over it. Rikki opened the door. He took one look at them.

"Get the hell away from here. You ought to know better than to come here."

He started to close the door.

"I've been shot," the spaceman said. "I've got a bullet in me right now. I've got to have help."

"And have the cops trail you here and charge me with harboring a wanted man?" Rikki yelled. "Get to hell away from my door!"

The spaceman pulled his weapon. Rikki stared at it. His face worked convulsively. The pupils of his eyes grew very large, then narrowed to pin-head size. His mouth became a thin straight line.

"Don't you know who this is, you damned fool?" Little Joe blurted out.

"I know who he is," Rikki said. He did not take his eyes off the weapon.

"Then you know you had better open up," the spaceman said. He

made a jabbing motion with the weapon as if he was going to stick it into Rikki's ribs.

"I'm opening up," Rikki said hastily. As he opened the door, his eyes went past the gun to the brief case. He licked his lips. "Did - - - did you - - -"

"Shut up and let me inside," the spaceman said.

Rikki took them to a small basement room with a cot and a couple of chairs in it. There was one window, up high. Rikki closed it. The spaceman flung the brief case on the cot "Open it," he said.

With trembling hands, Rikki obeyed. Money spilled out of it. Bundles of five-dollar, ten dollar, twenty dollar bills! Each held by a rubber band. Little Joe's eyes bulged at the sight.

"I had him open his safe," the spaceman said, satisfaction in his voice.

Rikki fondled the stacks of bills, then his hands dived into the brief case again. Out came diamonds. Some were loose. Others were mounted in rings. They formed a small glittering pile on the canvas cot.

"He had a lot of loose rocks in his safe," the spaceman said. "I brought them along too." His face was twisted with pain but there was something in it more powerful than the pain - - - a lust for wealth. It showed in his eyes as he looked

at the money and the diamonds. He wanted these things. He loved money and the things it would buy.

"I slugged him as I left but I must not have knocked him out. He came to and took a shot at me." The spaceman's face grew grim as he spoke.

"You stole those!" Little Joe heard his own voice whisper. "You're a thief!"

Rikki looked up. For the first time, he really became aware of Little Joe's presence. "We had to have financing," Rikki said quickly.

"You stole to get it," Little Joe said.

"This was not theft!" Rikki shouted, anger rising in his voice. Or was it fear? "We had to have financing now, to get started, so we took what will belong to us in another few years anyhow, when they land in force. Everything will be ours, when they land. Everything!" His voice rose to a scream. "We only took a little part of what we will have coming to us rightfully, when they land in force."

Listening, Little Joe wondered if Rikki was trying to convince himself. "The pawnbroker is dead," he said. His face was suddenly wooden and his voice was stolid. "And when I got that message this morning, I was being set up

as a sucker to drive a get-away car tonight."

His words produced leaden silence in the room. It was the spaceman who spoke. "Yeah, the pawnbroker is dead. And you had better remember that, in case you start getting any false ideas as to who is boss around here." The weapon in his hand was pointed at the cab driver.

"There will be hundreds of cops after you," Little Joe said, his voice emotionless. "They'll have tommyguns and tear gas and - - -"

"And I will have this," the spaceman said, nodding toward the weapon in his hand. His eyes focused on Little Joe's face.

The cab driver clamped his lips shut.

The spaceman looked at Rikki. "You might do a little remembering too, if you are ever tempted to forget who is boss here."

Rikki tore his eyes off the money and the jewels. He looked at the weapon. A shiver passed over his body. "I won't forget - - - What's that?"

A siren was wailing in the distance.

Rikki's face went pale. "Do you hear that?"

The three listened. The siren was coming closer. Rikki's face developed a sudden tic and his eyes became wild. "I told you that you shouldn't have come here.

You've got us all into trouble."

"You may be in trouble," the spaceman said. "Not me. I'm not in any trouble."

AS THE MEANING of the spaceman's words reached Rikki, his eyes flared with sudden hate. "Damn you!"

The finger of the spaceman tightened on the firing mechanism. Rikki's face went paper white. "I didn't mean what I said," he screamed. "I was out of my head."

"How'd you like to be dead?" the spaceman asked. His voice was as cold as the far reaches of space itself.

"Please! Have a heart. I didn't mean it." Rikki sprawled on his knees to beg for his life.

"Okay," the spaceman said, contempt in his voice. He lifted a foot and kicked Rikki in the face. Rikki fell over backwards. Blood was on his face when he sat up. He made whining noises deep in his throat.

"I thought you had guts. I thought you would make a leader!" The contempt grew deeper in the spaceman's voice.

The siren wailed past on the street outside. It went into silence in the distance.

The spaceman relaxed. "Just a routine call, maybe an accident somewhere, maybe a prowler."

He looked at Little Joe. "You've stood up pretty well tonight. When

we take over, how would you like to be one of our leaders?"

"What about Rikki?"

"We can't have leaders like him." The spaceman's eyes were suddenly malevolent. "Our leaders have to have guts."

Crash!

The basement window burst inward. The cap and the grim face of a policeman appeared in it. He had a gun in his hand.

"Get your hands up!"

"I told you they'd catch us!" Rikki screamed.

The spaceman flicked the muzzle of his weapon upward toward the window. As he did this, the cop pulled the trigger of his gun.

Lead howled through the basement room. Smoke from the pistol made a spurting rolling cloud in the air. Rikki's screams were loud and hideous.

The spaceman pressed the firing mechanism of his weapon.

The cop's face turned white. Instantly it glowed like the light of the sun. The pistol, held through the broken window, fell from a suddenly nerveless hand into the basement room. The body of the policeman seemed to try to follow it. He was too big to get through the opening. His body was caught in the broken window.

His uniform burst into flaring light. There was no flame. Just light. Vibrations at tremendously

high frequency seemed to flood the room. Then came the smell of cooking flesh. The smell was that of old, old ham, over-cooked in a skillet that was much too hot, with the result that it had to fry in its own grease.

The basement room was flooded with the rank smell, a gruesome, retchprovoking nausea.

When the spaceman turned off his weapon, the body of the cop continued to blaze with an intense light that was not flame but which consumed faster than any known form of combustion.

Rikki, his body drawn into a ball and his head in his hands, lay on the floor. Little Joe leaned against the wall. Feelings that he did not like were in him, turning his body to stone.

The spaceman swept the money and the jewels back into the brief case. His eyes came to Little Joe.

"You've got to show me how to get out of here," he said.

As he spoke, the door burst open. Her hair in curlers, Mabel stood there. She was wearing a sheer nightgown. Awakened from sleep by the shot, she had forgotten to put on a robe. Sleep was still in her eyes. She stared wildly around the room. Her eyes widened when she saw the body of the policeman burning in the window.

"What --- what happened? What makes him burn like that?"

"This happened to him," the spaceman said, indicating his weapon.

Her gaze came to rest on Rikki. "You've killed him too," she whispered. Dropping to her knees beside her husband, she tried to take his head into her arms.

RIKKI SAT UP. His eyes came to focus on the spaceman. As if he had seen more than he could bear, he dived under the cot. "Don't shoot me! Don't shoot me! Don't ---" His voice was like a scratchy phonograph record with the needle stuck in the same groove.

"I've got to get out of here," the spaceman said.

Mabel stared at him, but did not answer. If she had heard what he had said the words had no meaning to her. Her nose was beginning to twitch. "That awful smell. That awful, awful smell!" Suddenly she was retching.

The spaceman fingered his weapon. Obviously, since she was of no use to him, he was tempted to blast her. The thought passed. He looked at Little Joe. Without a word, the cab driver moved to the door. The spaceman followed him.

Little Joe opened the side door, then drew back. "There's a cop out here too. I just caught a glimpse of him."

"Try the front."

The cab driver led the way

down the corridor to the front door. Pushing aside the curtain, he looked out, only to duck back again. "There's a squad car parked at the curb in front," he said.

"Where are the cops?"

"I don't know. I didn't see any."

Somewhere in the distance another siren was wailing. Little Joe knew what this meant. The riot call had gone in. All the available reserves from this district were converging on this spot as fast as burning rubber could bring them. He did not doubt that other districts were also sending help. Through long experience, the Chicago police knew how to get where they were needed in a hurry.

"I'll try and walk out," the spaceman said. "If they try to stop me, I'll blast my way through them."

He kicked the door open. Little Joe backed against the wall. An order to halt rang out in the night. It was answered by a sudden blasting flare of light.

Little Joe held his breath. Death had walked out of this basement and he knew it. The policeman had nothing that could cope with the weapon of the spaceman. They would try to capture him and would go down to flaming destruction. He could blast his way to the squad car at the curb and commandeer it, then be gone into the night.

A heavy pistol barked twice, then was silent as the light weapon flared its death in the night.

A heavy rifle roared.

The bullet was fired from an elevation. The heavy slug, aimed downward, came through the basement door. Striking the concrete wall, it howled into a far corner of the corridor.

Little Joe threw himself flat. Vaguely he was aware that the light weapon had flared an answer to the rifle. He also knew that the rifle was keeping right on firing.

The spaceman stumbled back into the basement. "There's a man on top of the roof of the apartment across the street, where I can't get at him. If I go out, he'll kill me." His voice was hoarse and heavy.

The rifle roared again. The bullet pounded into the outside wall of the building. The spaceman ducked around a corner in the corridor and motioned the cab driver to follow.

"I guess they will come in here and try to get me," the spaceman said. "When they do that, they will know they have been somewhere before they finish."

"Don't you have a way to escape into space?" Little Joe asked.

The spaceman gave him an odd look.

A thud sounded on the floor of

the corridor. A hissing sound followed the thud. Little Joe caught a whiff of acrid odor. His eyes began to burn.

"Tear gas!" he said.

He retreated to the rear. Rubbing his eyes, the spaceman followed. "Is there any other way out of here?"

"There was talk about a tunnel - - -" Little Joe said, remembering what he had heard.

"Where is it?" the spaceman eagerly asked.

"I don't know. They didn't tell me. I wasn't important enough to know. Maybe Rikki or Mabel - - -

"We'll find out from them."

In the backroom window, the cop's body was still burning. The smell in the room was nauseous. Rikki was still under the cot. Mabel was kneeling beside him. She was holding her stomach. The spaceman kicked the woman to her feet. "Show us that tunnel!"

She led the way without a word of protest.

The tunnel led off from what had once been the coal bin. Before entering it, the spaceman prodded Little Joe ahead of him. The tunnel was narrow and the ceiling was low. The roof and the sides were supported by boards that had begun to rot away. The air was dank and musty. Rats ran ahead of them. Little Joe thought he was going to suffocate before

he reached the ladder at the far end.

"Go on up," the spaceman said. "When we get up there, we'll be behind the cops. We'll slip into your cab and ease out of the alley. We'll make a clean getaway before they even know we're not trapped in the basement." His voice was alive with excitement and with gloating. Once out of this death trap, he would be free.

A TRAP DOOR WAS OVER-head. Little Joe cautiously shoved it aside. A dim glow from a street light in the alley filtered through cracks in the old building. The tunnel opened directly under a stairway that led upward to the second floor.

Once this building had been a carriage house. Later it had been converted into a garage. No cars were in it. Stairs led upward to the second floor. Little Joe did not know what was up there. Sliding the trap door completely out of the way, he climbed into the dimly illumined big room. Grunting with satisfaction, the spaceman followed him.

Cold flesh appeared all over Little Joe's body as he realized they were not alone in this place. He caught a glimpse of three small figures that looked like children.

What were children doing here? They should have been in bed

long ago.

The spaceman saw them too. "What's that? Who are you? Get to hell out of here, you dirty little brats."

"We came for you," a soft voice whispered. Simultaneously the air vibrated with a humming sound.

Little Joe knew that a weapon of some kind had been fired. He heard the spaceman grunt, then wheeze as he tried to cry out in sudden pain. The wheeze went into quick silence. The sound that followed was that of a falling body.

The spaceman did not move after he hit the floor.

Little Joe stood frozen. One of the children approached the body on the floor and picked up the weapon that had fallen from the spaceman's outstretched hand. Voices like whispers echoed through the room. There was satisfaction in the voices as if some necessary job had been finally accomplished. The three children turned to Little Joe.

The room was very still. Little Joe raised his hands. Tremors passed through his body.

Off in the night, the high-powered rifle barked again, hunting for a target that no longer existed. In the far distance another siren was screaming. Little Joe heard sounds as from another world. His entire attention was concen-

trated on these amazing children. "Who -- who --" The words stuck in his throat.

"We are the true spaceman," the answer came back.

"Huh? The true spaceman? Then who was he?" He nodded toward the body on the floor.

"A human, one of the first we contacted. We did not know he was a thief and a killer." The voice was apologetic. "When he had learned a little about us, he pretended to set up an organization that would welcome us to his planet. We learned eventually that he was planning to use us to control his people. Also, he stole a weapon from us." The voice became even more apologetic. "Tonight our detectors finally located him, by the radiation from the weapon which he was using. In this way, we knew where to find him. We came here for that purpose."

Little Joe's heart was up in his throat. He had long since realized that the message he had been given to deliver to Rikki had been for the purpose of impressing him

so that he would be on hand to drive the getaway car for the pawnshop robbery. He had also realized that Rikki was actually a crook. With this realization, he had given up all hope that such things as real spacemen actually existed. Desolation had come over him as he had realized this.

"Then you actually are real?" he whispered.

"Yes. And we will come again. But now we have to go. We have been overlong in your heavy atmosphere."

They filed up the steps to the second floor. Little Joe followed them. A slender vehicle was parked on the flat roof of the building. He watched them enter it.

It went swiftly into the night sky.

Little Joe went back to his cab. . . . As he drives the Chicago streets by day, he keeps hoping that children will emerge from nowhere and get into his cab. As he drives at night, he watches the sky. Some day they will come again, the true space people. He waits. . . . patiently. . . .

FEATURED IN THE JUNE IMAGINATION: —

THE SINISTER INVASION

By

ALEXANDER BLADE

A terrific action novel of the spaceways by one of your top favorite writers . . . Don't miss the June issue of our companion magazine, on sale at your newsstand March 26th.

His enemy was only a short distance away and he knew one of them would soon die. It was just that simple—yet he hadn't planned on a—

Pause In Battle

by

Ivar Jorgenson

HE WAS YOUNG, twenty-three years old, the best age for a soldier according to one of the manuals issued by the Training Division of the Armies of the West; young, and armed with the latest and best that Western science had to offer; death-dealing weapons of course, because for over one hundred years, Western science had produced nothing else.

In fact, Western science had produced this boy — — — had drafted him as a human being and had turned him, by relentless and rigorous training, into a fighting machine — — — a finely adjusted, completely self-sufficient weapon in himself.

He squatted now, in a shell hole blasted into the surface of a desolate battlefield that had once been the State of Ohio. It still was the State of Ohio offi-

cially, but no one ever called it that because the age of peace and plenty — — — of which Ohio and all the other States had been a part — — — had long since vanished from the face of the earth; as the countries of Europe and Asia and South America and all the rest had long-since vanished; to flow and coalesce into two vast and terrible units — — — the East and the West.

Prior to that time it had been pretty generally believed that an atom war would depopulate the globe. But the war was ushered in by the Great Simultaneous Bombings and the peoples of the earth discovered how tough they really were. In ten years civilization had moved underground. Decades passed and the Atomic War ebbed and flowed, waxed and waned, to develop finally into a way of life, an eternal ferocity

that was as fluid as water, that knew no boundaries - - - no front lines.

And the most exquisite product of this science and this time was the Foot Soldier, the unit from which they bred the soul of Man and instilled the instincts of the tiger.

The young man crouching in the shell-hole was one of these.

A great battle raged around him. It was a major engagement, extending from the Great Lakes on the north to the Great Smokey Mountains to the south. Mile-wide explosions thundered and blasted and ripped the tortured soil. Rockets from the East - - - bombs from the space stations - - - and the wave-after-wave of Foot soldiers that were the core of the Eastern invasion.

There had been many of these invasions but the young man was not afraid. In fact, fear was beyond his understanding. Nor was he concerned with the scope of the battle, being interested only in his section of it - - - the two-acre plot that lay before him - - - and only with the enemy that was his personal responsibility.

This foe consisted of a single Eastern Foot Soldier now crouching somewhere in the broken ground ahead.

Each of these young men were

keenly aware of the other's presence. Each knew the other was alone and both were aware that one of them would be dead within fifteen minutes; that here, the military skills of the East and the West were matched right down to their vital elementals.

They both knew these things and both confidently expected victory; because each was entirely sure of his own machine-like invincibility.

The Western Foot Soldier wiped dirt from his hand and set the butt of his hand blaster snugly into his palm, aware that his enemy might be doing exactly the same thing.

His foe, he knew, was in a shell-hole about fifty feet away and slightly to his left. He peered carefully over the rim of his own shell-hole and spotted another one ten feet forward. He dug in with his boots, tensed his legs, took a last survey, and hurled himself forward.

As he did so, a green-clad form appeared from a point ahead, also hurling itself forward. Two hand blasters spoke in unison, ripping two spots of earth vacated an instant before by two forms diving simultaneously into fresh shell-holes.

But closer to each other now. A scant twenty feet separated

them.

The Western Foot Soldier calculated swiftly. There had been an error in his judgment and such errors were always fatal. The strategy of approach that he'd planned was faulty in that it would end in a stalemate and anything ending in less than victory was unthinkable.

But there was time to adjust his plan. It involved quick decision and speed and was in the nature of a flanking movement. Before the enemy raised his head, the Western Foot Soldier had to reach a shell hole on the right flank of his foe. Then, when the latter arose to make his final forward move, his back would be exposed for a vital second; an ample length of time for a soldier trained to rise and fire accurately in microseconds.

The Western Foot Soldier did not hesitate. Upon formulation of the plan, he braced himself instantly and hurtled forward. But even as he cleared the edge of his hiding place he realized he had been checkmated again; realized this as a green form came suddenly into sight and dived also for the flanking hole.

NEITHER was prepared to fire instantly and so for a few precious seconds they were com-

pletely helpless. Unable to brake themselves or readjust directions, they landed as though parts of a geometrical design, on opposite inclines of the flanking hole. In fact only a pile of earth in the bottom of the hole kept them from physical contact.

Brought face-to-face, they were remarkably similiar - - - two young, vital killing-machines fashioned by two evenly-balanced ideologies. And everything that their makers had drilled into them now said, *Kill and kill quickly. Use the instincts and the speed and the ferocity we have put into you. Kill to survive.*

So victory for one and death for the other hung within the next second. But the second passed. The hand blasters were not turned forward. Only half the arc of an arm did they move. Then they stopped. The two pairs of eyes clashed and held for one guarded moment. Then the arms were lowered, slowly, cautiously, and the eyes turned in unison to something new - - - something neither young man had ever seen before.

For a time, they stared and by some strange alchemy the scientists knew nothing about, their faces changed. The tense ferocity melted from their faces, blended with a new expression and was gone.

The Eastern Foot Soldier spoke in his native tongue. "What do you suppose it is?"

The Western Foot Soldier, familiar with six languages replied in his. "I don't know."

They reached forward --- each with a finger --- in unison and touched the delicate thing.

"I'd like to ---" The Eastern Foot Soldier hesitated.

"Like to what?"

"Well --- take it with me. I guess."

The implication of the words --- that of leaving the shell-hole alive snapped the spell --- the magic of this rare moment. The

faces of the two young men changed instantly as the instincts by which they lived—the training drilled into them from childhood—spoke each to its own:

Attention! Have you lost your mind? Shame! This is treason. You could be shot.

They reacted as one. The blasters came around in unison, spoke in concert, and death was a quick twin-agony wiping out two lives.

And blood spurted forth from two directions to stain the yellow petals of the buttercup on the mound of earth.

The first flower to grow in Ohio for almost one hundred years.



"Look! They had a written language!"

Delfield had his own problems on the tiny asteroid without listening to the complaints of a child. He wished Susie'd stop talking about—

The Pink Puppy Dog

by

Mark Reinsberg

THAT WAS A HARD-LUCK day for the Delfield family on K-840. In the early relative morning while everyone slept, a shard struck their asteroid.

Awakened from a sleep as vacant as the space surrounding their hermetic shack, Delfield felt their tiny fragment of a planet shudder in its orbit between Mars and Jupiter. He saw the position of the stars shift in the transparent dome overhead. Then he heard Susie wailing in the next compartment.

He jumped up and ran to the child, but Jean was already there, comforting Susie in her arms. She was a pretty two-year-old with brown ringlets and a skin so fair that veins were visible on her forehead. Tears welled from her yellow-gray eyes.

"It threw her out of bed," said Jean, with something of the child's fright in her own eyes. "What happened?"

"Could have been a rock ramming into us. I don't know. Could even be a spaceship. I'll have to go see."

He embraced Jean and held her close with Susie in-between. "It's all right, Susie, it's all right. It's all right."

"It's all right," said Jean. "Mommy and daddy protect you."

Delfield heard the throb of the air compressor, muted beneath their shack's thick gravity floor.

"Did that just go on?" he asked his wife. He was frowning and listening through Susie's wails.

"I didn't notice." She bounced the little girl playfully but her aside was sober.

Delfield strode to the hermestat. There was a slight drop in air pressure.

"Anything?" said Jean.

"It's down to thirteen."

"That could be normal leakage, couldn't it?"



"Yes," said Delfield, "but we'd better check. We absorbed quite a jarring."

A prospector's shack is small, a hemisphere less than thirty feet in diameter with a large triangular room in the center and three tiny compartments along the sides. But the surface area of the outer shell is enormous when you go searching for leaks. Delfield ran his eyes along the shelved, toy-cluttered wall of Susie's room. Then he inspected his own room, and finally the kitchen-bathroom compartment. No obvious signs of a crack.

"I'll make a thorough check from the outside," he said, putting on his clothes. Susie had stopped cry-

ing and Jean had laid her down in their double bed.

"This is one risk you didn't tell me about," Jean said while tickling Susie. The little girl was giggling delightedly.

"More tickle," she said each time Jean stopped.

"Collision in space is mathematically almost impossible," said Delfield.

"But it happened to us," Jean said drily.

He knew what was going on in her mind. She had knowingly assumed all the apparent hazards of an asteroid prospector's life -- bad synthetic food, unhealthy close quarters, isolation from people.

There was space sickness, too, and gravity disease, and always the possibility of a jammed airlock or failure of some other *nearly* perfect machine. On which their lives depended.

Now this new peril.

"You needn't worry, dear. It's a trillion to one it won't happen again." He grinned and she smiled wryly.

"Say, you don't think that was the man you were expecting? Making a crash landing?"

"The Mars Metals representative?" Delfield laughed. "Well, if so, we won't get the contract."

Jean laughed too, but it really wasn't very funny. They were both tensely awaiting his arrival. The ore samples they'd sent had aroused interest. That was definite. Mars Metals officials don't travel a hundred million miles from Ceres just to pay a social call.

Delfield got into his space boots, and Jean helped him put on the rest of the suit.

"Just when is this man supposed to arrive?" Jean asked as they adjusted the helmet. Relative time had so little meaning from planet to planet, and Jean had never been able to understand the new absolute time that astronomers had worked out for interplanetary use.

Neither had Delfield, too well. "Figure he'll be here around

supertime."

Jean winced. "Oh Dave! How can I make a decent meal with synthetics?" She was a short, pert brunette with Susie's fair skin and a naiad-like waist, and expressive round eyes of sapphire gray.

"Honey, this isn't like back on Earth when you bring home the boss for supper. These reps aren't impressed by home cooking on an asteroid. They want rich ore, not rich food."

DELFIELD WALKED CLUMSILY in his spacesuit towards the airlock. Then it happened as always. Susie popped out of bed and grabbed hold of his leg and started crying.

"Don't go, daddy! Don't go in airlock!" She wailed so forlornly and pathetically that it usually broke Delfield's heart, but now he was impatient.

"It's all right," said Jean. "Daddy will be right back."

"Don't go!" cried Susie.

Jean tried to detach her by force, unsuccessfully. Delfield himself was afraid to move, for fear his clumsy boots might come down on the child's bare feet.

"Scoot, Susie!" he ordered. "Go play in your room." Delfield was irritated.

"What makes her so damn insecure?" he demanded of Jean. He'd gone out in his suit at least

two hundred times since they set up, three months ago, on K-840. Somehow, Susie couldn't get used to the idea.

"Susie, how would you like to close the doors?" Jean suggested.

Resourceful of her, Delfield picked up the motif. "Yes, Susie, help mommy push the buttons."

On a panel in the central, triangular room were three toggle switches Susie loved to play with. They opened and shut the sliding doors of each room. Actually, they were spaceproof emergency hatches rather than simple doorways, sealing off the three outside compartments in case of a punctured hull.

"Push buttons," agreed Susie.

Jean carried her to the panel and the child stretched out her hand eagerly to flick the switches. With a muffled rumble the bulkheads slid shut. Susie was pleased.

"Now," said Jean, "open the kitchen door for daddy."

The airlock was a bulbous extension of the kitchen compartment.

"Say," said his wife "the compressor has stopped."

Delfield nodded in his helmet. "Yes I noticed."

"Then there's no air leak? You don't have to go outside?"

"It could be a slow leak, one that wouldn't start the compressor going until our hermestat was down to thirteen pounds per square inch.

We'd never find the hole from the inside but out in space I'd see air escaping like steam."

Delfield fastened his helmet and stepped into the lock. Always when he did he thought of the expense. It cost a dollar's worth of air each round trip he made. Trivial amount to the successful miner but he wasn't in that class.

Jean came in over the helmet radio. "Darling the compressor's started again."

"Yes it should. That's the air we lost in the lock."

He walked gingerly on the surface of Asteroid K-840. There was no atmosphere of course and there was no perceptible gravity either. His magnetic boots clung to the jagged mile-thick rock with a grip the manufacturers guaranteed would "never fail." But how many tales had he heard of asteroiders taking one vigorous uncautious step into eternal space? He thought of his suffocated spacesuited corpse floating in that infinite tank and his steps slowed to a guarded shuffle.

"See anything?" Jean asked.

"Not yet." He climbed the domed roof of their shack where he could see the full hemisphere surface. There were no telltale jets of steam. "Looks all right," he said at last.

"Good! Come on in then and have breakfast."

"A little later dear. I want to go over and see what hit us."

"Can't that wait?"

"Costs money to go in and out," he reminded her.

He and Jean had left Earth with enough reserve for at least a year, so they thought. But finding an asteroid was far more difficult than the many glowing magazine articles had suggested. All the big ones like Ceres and Pallas and Juno had been staked out for over a generation, with meager returns.

Then James Gorton found erbium and thulium on Lutetia, and the great Rare Earths Rush of '57 was on. By the time Delfield had given up his metallurgy job and reached the Belt, all the small asteroids of the mile-diameter class had also been gobbled up. After a month's futile search, Delfield solved the problem by buying up another man's unworked claim.

That left them with money enough for six months, half of which was now gone.

"Pink puppy dog," said Susie. One of her stuffed toys, he recalled.

"What about pink puppy dog, sweetheart?" Delfield asked.

Susie babbled happily and incoherently into the radiophone.

"Listen, Jean. I think it must have hit on the other side. I'm going to work my way over there."

"Dave," Jean protested. "Don't go without breakfast all morning just to save a little money."

"Please," said Delfield irritably. "This is important."

He strapped the portable jet onto his suit. It was a nozzle attached to a carboy of nitrogen gas. Delfield squirted it in the opposite direction from which he wanted to go, sailing low above the rocky surface at a cautious twenty miles an hour. Abruptly he was on the daylight side of K-840, illuminated by the pale diminished sun, little brighter at this distance than the terrestriall full moon.

"Dave, don't you think if this man's coming for supper I ought to prepare something fancy?"

"Well, sure, why not?"

"I think I'll radio Thetis for some frozen food. Have them make a special delivery."

Delfield tried hard to control his annoyance. "Look, honey, that's awfully expensive, and I don't think it's neccessary."

"But Mars Metals is so important to us. You want to make a good impression on this man. It's certainly worth the investment."

"No, Jean, I don't want you to do that."

Delfield scanned K-840 in the dim light. In shape it was rather like a mashed cigar butt, with raw, uneroded crags jutting at all angles, and signs of terrible stress where the asteroid had splintered away from some large parent body. There was in fact no ground smooth en-

ough and large enough on the daylight side to provide foundation for their hermetic hut. But it was on the daylight side that Delfield had discovered the praesodymium-ytterbium deposits, and it was there that he carried out his small-scale refining operations each day.

And it was there, as if aimed at the spot, that a massive shard had landed. It was a boulder that on Earth might weigh a thousand tons. On K-840 it weighed nothing. But its mass and inertia had squashed Delfield refinery to the shape of a lettuce leaf.

He let out an anguished wail.

DELFIELD WORKED MOST of the day without food or water, without returning to the shack. He strove frantically to clear away the rocky debris. He blasted and shoved and dug and hauled.

"Please, darling. Please let it go," his wife pleaded.

"Got to get it done before the man from Mars gets here. We don't stand a chance if he sees it like this."

"Oh Dave, this isn't our kind of life. Why do you struggle so?" Her voice became despairing as the hours passed.

Delfield's answers grew shorter. He was sweaty, breathless, exhausted. "We can make a fortune at this. Go back to Earth in a

year. Take it easy rest of our life."

"That compressor has been going steadily all day," Jean said. "Won't you come back and take a look at it?"

Nothing could tear Delfield away from his task. "Must've been the shock. Jarred the mechanism. Don't worry, Jean. I'll fix it."

"Dave," his wife said finally, "it's almost suppertime. If you expect this man at all, you'd better come home. Right now."

When Delfield returned he was desperately tired. For the first time in three months he allowed himself the luxury of a full hot bath. It was while he was in the tub, and while Jean was busy preparing the dinner, and while Susie was sitting on the floor with a dozen of her toys scattered about, that the man from Mars Metals arrived.

Delfield swooshed out of the bathroom, leaving a trail of wet footprints into the bedroom. Urgently, Jean swept the toys into Susie's room. When the visitor came through the airlock there was superficial order in the shack.

"Malcolm is my name, representing Mars Metals."

He was a tall, burly man with a bullet-shaped head and close-cropped hair. His cheeks were fleshy and his complexion a salmon pink characteristic of Mars settlers. He carried a bulky grey-leather briefcase which he set on the floor

alongside a toy Jean saw she had missed by the sofa.

"Yes, we've been expecting you. My husband will be right out. Won't you sit down?"

Susie came out of her room. "Pink puppy dog, mommy. Pink puppy dog." She gave the visitor a shy, puzzled look.

"Yes, darling, he's in your room," said Jean, smoothing her apron. "Mr. Malcolm, our daughter Susie."

Malcolm nodded cursorily but said nothing. Jean could see he was not the avuncular type. She went back to her dinner preparations, which had been thrown off schedule by the guest's early arrival.

The dinner itself was a failure. Malcolm did not eat synthetics, which was about all Jean had to offer. And Susie was unusually restive in her highchair, spilling and spattering everything that was put before her. It made a painful impression. Delfield had a sinking feeling, and was glad Malcolm avoided business talk at the table.

"I suppose," said Delfield afterwards, "that you want to take a look at the deposit?" There was no use postponing the inevitable.

"Not necessary," said the man from Mars Metals. "Your samples and survey tell us all we need to know."

Husband and wife exchanged electric glances. Delfield remained

prudently silent about the collision.

"Then you think the lode is commercial?"

"No doubt about it," said Malcolm. "We know this type of asteroid. Your samples are much like the K-370 group, which has proved very satisfactory."

Jean bathed Susie while the men talked. A warmth of optimism chased away the strain and weariness of three months. She sang nursery songs as Susie splashed in the tub. She dried the little girl and put on a bright red two-piece pajama. Then she carried Susie through the living room.

"Say goodnight to daddy and Mr. Malcolm."

"Goodnight," said Susie, sleepily waving an arm.

Jean carried the child into her room and dropped her into bed with a kiss. Then she sat down contentedly on the sofa beside Malcolm.

"There are two problems," Malcolm was saying. "First is the matter of subsidy. You'll need considerable financing."

"I don't understand," said Delfield. "I can produce the stuff without financial assistance. At least, I've been doing it up till now."

"Yes, but not in commercial quantities. It wouldn't pay us to route a ship this way for the amount you could produce by your-

self. You'll need a full-scale refinery here, plus ten or twelve hired hands."

"I didn't realize—" Delfield began, when Susie reappeared in her doorway.

She looked at her father hopefully.

"Come here, dear," Delfield said, and Susie trotted over beside him. He kissed her on the cheek and patted her back. "Now go to bed, sweetheart."

Susie stood doubtfully.

JEAN GOT UP AND TOOK her by the hand and led her back to the bedroom. "All right, dear," she whispered. "Pop into bed."

Susie started to whimper. "No bed, mommy. No pop into bed."

"Oh, you must darling."

"Pink puppy dog," Susie whined.

"You want pink puppy dog in bed with you?" Jean said. "All right." She turned on the bedroom light and glanced at the toy-strewn floor. The particular stuffed animal was nowhere in sight. "I'm sorry, honey. I can't find pink puppy dog. But here's teddy bear." She laid the brown animal beside Susie and turned off the light. "Goodnight, dear."

"—Very well," continued Malcolm, "let's assume then that a hundred fifty thousand would cover the initial payroll period.

You can have that at five and a half per cent. And Mars Metals will rent you the machinery for depreciation value plus ten per cent." He withdrew a figure chart from his briefcase. "For a type D refinery, which is the largest you could use, that would amount to forty-five thousand a year."

"Do you actually believe," Delfield said, unable to conceal his awe, "that K-840 can yield three quarters of a million in the first year?"

Malcolm stared expressionlessly.

"That's our conservative estimate. An aggressive man can probably exceed that figure by as much as one-third. Which of course brings us to our second consideration, your—"

"Daddy!" It was Susie again in the doorway. She was rubbing her eyes unhappily. "Daddy!"

"Go to bed, Susie," Delfield said firmly. He could see that Malcolm was staring at the little girl in annoyance.

Jean popped up again. "Into bed, young lady!" she said sternly.

"Don't want ago to bed!"

Jean took her arm and pulled Susie into the bedroom. "Now listen, young lady! Do you want a spanking, or are you going to bed?"

"Wee-wee," said Susie. "Have to make a wee-wee."

Her mother stood for a moment

in uncertainty. They had only in the past two months completed the child's toilet training. "All right," Jean relented. She picked up Susie and carried her to the bathroom.

"The second consideration," said Malcolm, "is your own ability, Mr. Delfield. Your own administrative ability. Your ability to handle an operation of this size and complexity.

"You are a good prospector. There's no doubt of that. You've proved up your claim in a very short time, and your samples show a fine sense of discrimination. However, I must say candidly, there are hundreds of good prospectors in the Asteroid Belt. Men just as capable as you are, if not always as lucky.

"The men we're looking for are not merely prospectors. They're highly competent administrators. They're able to handle other men. They're able to keep those men working hard. They're able to drive them and discipline them, and produce results!

"Are you that kind of a man, Mr. Delfield? Can you do the job?"

"I think so," said Delfield confidently. "But you'll have to be the judge of that. You see, on Earth- -"

"Pink puppy dog! I want pink puppy dog!" Susie wept in the doorway.

Delfield felt a flush of embar-

rassment. What a night for Susie to be difficult! He looked at Jean imploringly. His wife glanced down with a helpless expression.

"Excuse me," said Delfield to the man from Mars Metals. He got up and went into Susie's bedroom.

"Susie, you'll have to get into bed, and no more nonsense."

"Pink puppy dog."

Delfield picked up the little girl and put her in bed. "Now you stay there and be quiet or you'll get a spanking."

She was silent as he turned to leave. Then she clambered out of bed.

"Daddy, give me pink puppy dog."

Delfield lost his patience. He knew Malcolm was watching and listening, especially after that speech about disciplining other men. He'd never really spanked Susie before, but he did so now.

She cried terribly, inconsolably, in her bed. It was impossible to carry on a conversation in the living room with her wails and the persistent humming of the compressor in the background.

This was such an important interview, such a turning point in his career, to be marred by an unruly child.

Jean glared at him disapprovingly as Delfield flicked the switch. The door to Susie's room slid firmly

shut, muffling her cries almost completely. After a while they died out, and the air compressor stopped also, but it was hard for Delfield to pick up the thread of conversation.

What had he been about to say about himself on Earth?

The two discussed other, peripherical points, yet Delfield knew the damage was done. He had a sinking, heartsick feeling when Malcolm closed his briefcase a half hour later.

"Well," said the man from Mars Metals, standing up, "this has been a very pleasant chat. Quite instructive and exploratory on both sides." He started to put on his spacesuit: "I'll report the substance of our discussion to the regional office on Ceres. I'm sure you'll be hearing from us very shortly."

They watched his private rocket take off, and then Jean said anxiously, "What do you think?"

"I'm sure they will say no," said Delfield wearily. "Had it been yes, Malcolm would have signed me up tonight."

Jean caught her breath, suddenly remembering. "Oh! Poor Susie! Why did you shut the door on her like that?"

"Why did she behave like that?" Delfield said angrily.

Jean ran to the door switch. The door mechanism whined but the hatch itself remained tightly in

place.

"It must be jammed," said the father. He pounded on the metal panel. "Now try it."

Jean flicked the switch back and forth several times. The door did not move.

Then Delfield saw the red warning light on the jamb above the door. "The safety!" he screamed. "It won't work because of the safety!" He got into his space suit swiftly, with trembling hands and sobbing breath.

A moment later he was outside the hermetic shack in the deep space vacuum of Asteroid K-840. He was staring into Susie's room by the light of an electric torch. His child lay in bed asleep, brown ringlets framing her face, the fine tracery of veins faintly visible on her forehead.

She was a beautiful little girl, and the sleep had come gradually, tenderly. The air had leaked out slowly through the small crack at the base of the hemisphere, where the rock had faulted. All day the compressor had replaced the loss. Until Delfield closed the door, the airtight door.

In one claw of his spacesuit the father held an emergency blowout patch. It was hard for him to put it on the breach. Half through the hole, where it had been sucked by escaping air early in the morning, was Susie's pink puppy dog.

THE LAST KILLER



Five hundred thousand years was plenty of time for man to evolve to a point where hatred and murder were forgotten. But not entirely! . . .

By Randall Garrett

HOL GORMAN HUDDLED down tight in the purpling shadows, hoping desperately that Lars Thule would not see him.

Out there on that bleak, dimly-lit plain, it was easy to stay hidden—for a while. But Gorman knew he couldn't keep running forever.

Eventually he'd have to turn and meet Lars Thule face to face, and fight it out with mankind's first killer in five hundred thousand years.

Above, the sun flickered balefully, a swollen red orb that gave little light and less heat. Bitingly winds swept down the endless plain. Long since, the winds and the tides had polished ancient Earth bare of hills and valleys. All was plain, now.

Earth was coming to the end of her days, and the planet and its people had reached stability. All flowed smoothly on to the approaching end, when the last spark of light would vanish and life would cease.

But Lars Thule interrupted the smooth process—Lars Thule, who brought violence and fear to Earth's last days.

"Where are you, Gorman?" The harsh bellow travelled over the flat land. "You can't hide from me forever, you know!"

Why are you doing this Thule? Gorman asked bitterly, as he hunkered down out of sight. *Why kill and steal and maim?*

There was no answer.

There was no reason for it.

Mankind had been at peace for half a million years, living quietly on the dying earth—and now Lars Thule had revived the old bloody ways. He had killed, he had stolen,

he had raped. He was hunting Hol Gorman, and would kill him when he caught him.

Gorman was not afraid of Thule—like Lars, Hol was a tall, powerfully-built man, and fear did not enter into the problem. No. It was blank lack of comprehension of the nature of violence that drove Gorman to hide on the plain. He did not understand—and he did not know how to defend himself. All his teachings warned not to raise one's hand in violence—but what of self defense?

He didn't know.

He was growing cold, even in his wrapper of *Stac-Fur*. He wanted to get back to the village, to stand around the community fire and warm himself.

But there was Lars Thule between him and the village. Suddenly, Gorman made up his mind. It was bad to kill and hurt—but self defense was allowed.

"I'm over here, Thule," he called. "I'm coming out of hiding."

HE ROSE FROM BEHIND the twisted bush that had concealed him as Lars Thule turned in surprise.

"I see you, Gorman!"

"Stay away from me," Hol warned. "I'm going back to the village, and I don't want you stopping me."

Lars Thule laughed raucously.

"Suppose I want to stop you, Hol?"

"I'm asking you to leave me alone."

With tense steps, Gorman walked toward the waiting figure of Lars Thule. Even in the dimness of mid-afternoon light, Gorman could see the killer's ugly features clearly—the heavy lips, the jutting, angular nose, the deepset dark eyes beneath thick brows. Lars Thule was waiting for him, flexing his big hands. He was grinning coldly.

"That's it—keep coming, Hol. Keep on coming."

"Get away from me, you madman."

Madman. It was an odd word, and Gorman was surprised it had leaped to his lips so easily. Earth had forgotten what madmen were, until the day Lars Thule first slew.

He continued to walk toward Lars Thule. A *stac*—a large, fur-bearing rabbity creature with gloomy eyes and spindly legs—came hopping out of nowhere and started to skip between them. Gorman's eyes brightened. *Stacs* were valuable to the little community; their fur and their hides were used for clothing, their scrawny flesh for food. He forgot about Thule for a moment and made a tentative motion toward the *stac*.

"Let that animal alone," Lars Thule ordered. He took three run-

ning steps forward and blocked Gorman's path, allowing the animal to escape.

Gorman's eyes angrily met Thule's "We need *stacs* badly," Hol snapped. "Or don't you care about the community?"

"The community? Hah!" Suddenly something bright flashed in Lars Thule's hand.

The knife.

They said he had a knife, that he had been using a weapon to kill. In the two days since Thule had gone mad, four men of the village had been found dead, throats cut. It was almost impossible to believe.

But now Gorman had to believe it. The knife hovered in midair in front of him, and Thule was getting ready to add his fifth victim.

Gorman's mind was paralyzed with disgust and horror, but his body acted for him. As Thule's hand swept toward his throat, Hol's right arm shot up, grasped Thule's wrist, and twisted downward. Thule started to fall forward and caught himself, just as Gorman's other arm grabbed his shoulder and pushed him down.

Thule bellowed in rage and fell forward on his face almost at Gorman's feet, the knife burying itself to the hilt in the hard soil. Gorman sidestepped and started to run.

"Come back here, you coward!"

Coward!"

But Gorman kept running.

Am I a coward? he asked himself, after he had safely outdistanced Thule and was well on his way back to the village. *No.* He hadn't run away out of fear, but simply out of revulsion. Lars Thule was like a cancer in the village; he was to be shunned.

But yet Gorman felt dissatisfaction with himself. Thule had hunted him to the plains and had failed to kill him, but yet Gorman felt little pride in his escape. Something was wrong with running away.

Gorman found himself wishing Lars Thule would die. It was a strange and surprising thought, and made him feel ill at ease.

Ten minutes later, he was at the village. The village was a semi-circle of small houses clustered around a communal fire kindled and sustained by psychic force. The psi-beams also lit and warmed the homes.

Each family group had a home of its own, and there were dormitories for the single men and women—in which category both Gorman and Thule fit. There were about a hundred people living in the village.

The nearest neighboring village was over fifty miles away. A hundred miles to the north, one of the ancient cities stood — a deserted

ruin that, thousands of years before, had been the home of ten million people. Now, as the Earth swung toward its final days, not ten million people inhabited the entire planet, and the giant cities were unpopulated and quiet.

As Gorman came trotting into the village, a little group of people came out to meet him.

"Where's Thule?" demanded Dril Holdreth, the tribe's oldest man. "We thought he was going to kill you."

"He was," Gorman said. He flushed hotly and added, "I escaped. He fell down and I ran away."

"We're happy to see you back with us," said Leslyn Corper, one of the village's few unmarried girls. "Thule said he was going to kill you, and I thought—"

"Yes," Gorman said. "He didn't. Let me alone, will you?"

He shouldered past them and into his house. Sinking down on his cot, he threw off his heavy furs and mindlessly let the warmth relax him. He was in trouble, and he knew it.

It had begun yesterday, when Lars Thule had emerged from his room in the back and announced that from now on he would have a double share of food. Gorman had been reading in his room, and heard the announcement without coming out to see what was happen-

ing.

Then there had been loud voices, and the sound of arguing, and a scream. Gorman had thrown down his tapeviewer and rushed into the hall in time to see Thule fleeing out the door. Lying in the middle of the floor was Daws Kendil, his throat red with bubbling blood.

The terror had continued through the day, and three more had died. The little village was paralyzed. Earth had been without crime, without violence of any sort so long that they were utterly unable to deal with or even understand Lars Thule, and they waited passively while he brought death.

He had come to the women's building and asked for Leslyn Copper. Leslyn had gone to her window and shouted that Hol Gorman would see to it that Thule answered for anything done to her. Thule had smirked evilly; "I'll take care of Hol Gorman," he said.

Leslyn had warned Gorman—and, as Thule approached, Gorman had fled to the open plain. Now he had returned. But he couldn't keep running away forever. Sooner or later, Lars Thule would catch him and kill him, and then the tribe would be his plaything.

Leslyn —

Huddled there miserably, Gorman realized for the first time

that he should have married Leslyn long ago. He had delayed; life moved slowly, in the twilight days, and he had postponed the wedding for no other reason than that there seemed no hurry. But now that Lars Thule stood between them, Gorman felt bitter rage at himself for his delay.

A shadow fell across his hearth. He looked up, half expecting to see Thule standing there. But it wasn't Thule.

"Hello, Leslyn."

The girl stepped inside the room and looked strangely at Gorman. "Lars Thule just returned to the village, Hol," she said quietly. "He's coming here to get you."

FOR A MOMENT the words didn't sink in. Then he looked up. "What does he want with me?"

"He wants me, Hol. Me — and the power of life and death over this village. You stand in his way. You're the only one big enough to stand up to him, and if he can get rid of you he'll be the boss."

Gorman studied his fingers numbly. "So he wants to kill me?"

"Yes."

He glanced up at her. "Leslyn, what am I supposed to do? I'm not a fighter; fight's been bred out of man. I get sick to my stomach at the thought of killing." Seeing her sarcastic grin, he added,

"Yes, sick. Big as I am. Leslyn, I'm *civilized*. I can't turn myself into a beast."

"Lars Thule has," Leslyn said. "Five hundred thousand years of civilization hasn't had much effect on him. Why can't you?"

Gorman tried to protest that it wasn't through fear but through something else that he kept from lifting his hands against the madman. But he couldn't make the argument sound coherent enough to frame it in words.

He got up and walked to the window. The dying sun hung low in the late-afternoon sky like a swollen, distorted plum on the horizon. Earth had grown old, Gorman thought, and mankind old with it — and here, in the twilight of life, the beast was loose again on the Earth.

"He'll be here any minute," Leslyn said.

Gorman nodded. Let me think this thing out. Let me think, Leslyn."

"Think all you want. Thule will be here any minute."

Gorman frowned and knotted his hands together. *Why did this happen?* he asked himself. *And why should civilized men be powerless against the beast?*

There was a faint click as the photonic door-beam was broken. Lars Thule stepped through the door as it slid back. The madman

grinned.

"How cozy, Gorman. Just you and the lady!"

"Get out of here, Thule. This is my room."

Thule chuckled harshly. "It used to be," he said. He took his coat off and dropped it on Gorman's cot. Then he reached out, grabbed Leslyn, and drew her close. He kissed her, while Gorman watched in impotent rage.

There will be no more violence, he thought, watching Leslyn tear herself from Thule's embrace and run to the far corner of the room.

We must remain civilized.

But yet —

There was hatred on Leslyn's face, and the chilling realization came to Gorman that it was hated equally for Thule and for him — for Thule for taking the kiss, for Gorman for not stopping him.

Again the question came: *why should civilized men be powerless against the beast?*

He looked at the hate-contorted features of Lars Thule, and knew the answer. *The way to keep civilization is to destroy the beast.*

Violence could be justified — in the name of civilization. Relief flooded through Gorman. His hands were untied at last.

"I'm going to slice your throat," Thule said malevolently, and started toward him.

"You can try!" Gorman said in

sudden defiance.

Thule advanced. The knife-blade glittered in mid air, and then Gorman came to life.

He charged forward, the violence of his assault throwing Thule backward. As the surprised Thule struggled for balance, Gorman's hand sought the knife.

Thule recovered, drew the knife down, raked it across Gorman's shoulder. A hot furrow of blood sprang out on Gorman's back and arm, but he whipped his elbow up, caught the tip of Thule's chin, and rocked the big man. In the same motion, he grabbed at the wrist holding the knife.

He caught it and twisted savagely. The knife hit the floor with a dull tinkle and skittered away somewhere. The blood was like fire on Gorman's shoulder, but he kept twisting Thule's arm downward.

Thule grunted and brought his other fist crashing into Gorman's midsection. Hol recoiled, backed away.

He took a tentative, clumsy punch and missed. Thule's eyes blazed with hatred; he advanced on Gorman again. Dimly, Gorman heard Leslyn sobbing in the corner, and it seemed to him that there were other people watching from the doorway — watching, but not interfering. This was a fight between Thule and Gorman, and

they would not meddle.

Gorman held ground and matched blows with Thule. As the conflict proceeded, Gorman noticed an odd thing happening. Thule seemed to be wearying — but he, Gorman, was growing stronger. He was learning how to fight as the moments passed, discovering how to bring pain, and as he learned his body gloried in the new knowledge.

He was driving Thule backward steadily now — two paces, three. They were nearly across the room now.

"Damn you, Gorman! You're like a wild man!"

Gorman chuckled and lashed out with a fierce attack. Thule parried desperately and crashed his knuckles stunningly into Gorman's lips. Gorman licked the blood away and drove a blow into Thule's midsection.

Thule gasped for breath, and Gorman hit him again. Thule sagged. His arms windmilled frantically without hitting anything. Judging his blow accurately, Gorman brought one up from the floor and bashed into Thule's jaw with frightening impact.

Thule rocked and spun over backward. Gorman glanced down at his numbed knuckles — then, at Leslyn's little scream, looked hurriedly up.

But Thule was not attacking. Thule lay crumpled on the floor,

a trickle of blood winding down from the side of his mouth and staining the plastite carpet.

Gorman looked around. Suddenly the room seemed full of people — ten, perhaps twenty of them. They were bending over Thule, lifting him up. Gorman massaged his crippled fingers tenderly. He was too dazed to think.

Finally he caught his breath. "What happened to Thule?" he asked.

Old Dril Holdreth looked up from the fallen man. "He's dead, Hol. He hit his head against the table."

"Dead?"

Holdreth nodded.

Gorman felt sick. He tried to blink away the dizziness, and mopped his forehead. "I — killed him, then." He repeated that, as if to convince himself of it.

He spied Thule's rolled-up coat lying on the cot where he had tossed it. With a strange expression on his face, he picked up the dead man's coat.

There was something hard in it. Frowning, Gorman reached inside and drew it out.

It was a book — not a tape, but an old-fashioned book, of incredible antiquity. Curiously, Gorman flipped through it — and shuddered.

Now he understood. The book

was a book of the old times, of the insane half-forgotten years of the distant past, when man killed man.

He knew what had happened. Lars Thule had gone off on a one-man expedition to the ancient city to the north, had found this book. He had read it, read of the terrible old ways of mankind — and somehow their contagion had infected him across half a million years.

"What's that you have there?" Leslyn asked.

"Nothing," Gorman said quickly. He walked to the fire, held the book above the radiance for an instant, tossed it in. It sparkled brightly for a moment, then was consumed.

"Things that are better off forgotten," he said, half to himself. He looked at Thule's body. They had covered it with a cloak now.

Force and violence had returned briefly to the world—and had been struck down only by greater force and fiercer violence. Gorman looked at his swollen, bruised fists again, and shook his head.

Outside, the weary sun was sinking below the horizon. The world's days were numbered, Gorman thought. He drew Leslyn close and held her tightly. Only a few centuries remained. But Earth's last killer lay dead, and peace had come again to the dying planet.



I WAS A Teenage Werewolf! No, not me personally; it's been a quarter of a century since I qualified as a teenage anything — sci-fi fan, for instance. But I have been reliably informed by the President of the American-International Film Distribution Corporation, who was Vice-Presy of my Boys Sci-fi Club when we were both hi-schoolers, that *I Was A Teenage Werewolf* is a legitimate title scheduled for production by his company. He laffed when I suggested a few illegitimate sequels, so maybe you will too: "I Was An Abominable Teenage Snowman," "I Was A Teenage Creature from 20,000 Fathoms Under the Amazon," "I Was A Teenage Octogenarian," "I Was A Shrinking Teenager" and "I Was Tarantula (for the FBI)".

War of the Universe will be directed by Kurt (RXM) Neumann

from an original story by Irving Block. Regal Films will produce. *Queen of the Universe* is coming from Allied Artists, scripted by sci-fi writer Chas Beaumont.

Godzilla returns — and meets up with Anzilla, another prehistoric Oriental monster — in *The Volcano Monsters*, an English version co-scripted by Ib Melchoir & Ed Watson. The nightmares from Nippon raise a hullabaloo in Honolulu and a fracas in San Francisco in this Topaz presentation.

Geo Pal has optioned "Lost Eden" by Paul McGinnis, while a Mexican motion picture outfit has gone ahead and filmed *Adam and Eve*. We'll probably see Pal's pic before the *South of the Border* product, tho, as in the latter Senor Adam y Senora Eve don't wear so much as a single fig leaf, and you know how the norteamericano censors are.

about exposing anything south of the border...

It looks like we're in for the Beast Years of Our Lives what with American threatening us with *Beast from Beneath the Sea*, *Beast of Paradise* and *Devil Beast*; United Artists releasing *The Monster That Challenged the World* (formerly *The Kraken*); Boris Petroff scheduling *The House of Monsters*, *The Green Eye*, *They Lived a Million Years* and *I Buried the Devil*; *From Hell It Came* being unleashed by the Milner Bros; *Dragons of Lost World* being loosed by Al Zimbalist; *Attack of the Crab Monsters* crawling out of Roger Corman's repertoire; Roach approaching *The Jagged Edge* with a fearsome 400-Footer; *The Deadly Mantis* diving from Wm Allard's eyrie; *Attack of the Sky Creature* coming down out of the clouds from Clover Productions; and Selznick Studios set to offer a new version of *Beauty and the Beast*.

Small wonder, in view of the foregoing announcements, that Hollywood has come up with a sci-fi-film title, *The Day the Earth Went Out of Its Mind*.

Speaking of small wonders, following his screenplay stint on *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, s.f. author Richard Matheson has been assigned the job of scripting *Gulliver's Travels*. Hollywood will be out of its mind if some profit-seeking producers don't snap up such classics of microscopia as "He Who Shrunk," "The Girl in the Golden Atom" and "The Green Man of Graypec." Notice the number of "shrinkies" on TV recently? — MGM's master-print of the murderous miniature

manikins of Madame Mandilip as created by A. Merritt in "Burn Witch Burn!" and filmed as *The Devil Doll* with Lionel Barrymore and Maureen O'Sullivan; and Fitz-James O'Brien's classic, brought up to date in *Favorite Story* by Adolphe Menjou, "The Diamond Lens". The time is ripe for Paramount to re-release *Dr Cyclops*. And someone to produce Robert Bloch's "It's A Small World," Weaver Wright's "Micro-Man" andor Leslie Stone's "Man Who Fought A Fly". Along these lines, Sol Lesser bought Edmond Hamilton's "Pygmy Island" from the Science Fiction Agency, and Tom (Donovan's Brain) Gries will direct said Weird Tales yarn from a screenplay of his own creation.

From the small to the tall, Frank Quattrocchi's Amazon in *Gigantoso* stands three men high in her stalking feet, while Homer Eon Flint's *Nth Man* (probably to be portrayed by sci-fi artist and actor Paul Blaisdell) will tower two miles and knock aeroplanes out of the sky like gnats.

A NOVELIZATION of the screen-play of *The Living Idol*, melodrama of evil and reincarnation in color and cinemascope, is now available as a pocketbook from Signet. "Snow Fury", "The Man from Tomorrow" and "The Jet-Propelled Couch" in "The Fifty Minute Hour" are other pocketbooks available on the stands which have been selected for filming.

The Slime People will crawl out of the waters around Cuba and send the populace of that island

into a panic... Republic Studios will film a flying saucer attack... Famous fan Wilson (Bob) Tucker's successful novel, "The Long Loud Silence", has been optioned for cinemadaptation... Stanley Weinbaum's thrice-televersioned "Adaptive Ultimate" has also been optioned. Properly developed, directed and acted, this should make a pip of a picture... The King Bros are planning a bilingual (German-English) version of Pat Frank's famous "Mr Adam"... Gramercy Productions will essay *The Mark of the Vampire*... American-International has purchased old-timer Jack Williamson's "Wovles of Darkness" from Strange Tales via the Science Fiction Agency, and is dickering with same agency on Amelia Reynolds Long's "The Thought-Monster" and an original by Frank Quattrocchi, "The Projected Man".

Pharaoh's Curse.

The Curse of Dracula.

The Curse of Frankenstein.

Voodoo Woman. Voodoo Island.

Vanishing Island.

Out of the Deeps and *The Girl from Beneath the Sea.*

The Snow Creature, British; *The Abominable Snowmen*, a Geo Pal project; and *Operation Snowman*, a hot screenplay by a couple of cool cats, Budd Bankson & Larry Jackson.

Team of Bankson & Jackson has also turned out an original scientifarcce idea aimed at the comedic talents of, say, Red Skeleton, involving a flying saucer, an interplanetary voyage and some Yukademy Award situations, called *The Day Before Tomorrow*.

Man of A Thousand Faces (the Lon Chaney story with James Cagney) and *The Demolished Man* (the Alfred Bester story with Jose Ferrer).

THANK YOU, Hope Lugosi, for the information about *Grave Robbers from Space*, the last film appearance of your late husband, Bela. I'll look forward to attending the premiere with you and Dick (Dracula Jr) Sheffield — and to seeing you again there, too, Vampira! Thanks, Ray (King Kong) Harryhausen, for the phone call after flying back from your 5 weeks technical work in Italy on *The Giant Ymir*, which you tell me is now known as 20,000,000 *Miles to Earth*. Ta, Dick Matheson, for the word that the future of "I Am Legend" for filming looks assured; this is a novel I've been touting as a natural since the first day I read it.

Much obliged, Chas Nuetzel, for the info on the giant grasshopper angle of *The Beginning of the End*, and let me know soonest, Jim Nicholson, when I can take the wraps off that scoop you confided to me about the sci-fi property by the Pulitzer Prize winner. Merci beaucoup, Rickert von Halspiegel, for the ducats to Jules Verne's *Around the World in 80 Days*, greatly enjoyed by Wendayne and I. Interested to learn from you, Don Grollman, there'll be a picture called *Half Human*, and to pass the word along to my readers. Your *Carroll Formula*, already telefilmed, sounds like it'd make a funsome fulllength feature, Johnny Greene, and see you at the sci-fi section of our local newsstand again soon.

Thanks, Marla English, you beautiful she-creature you, for the fotos; and Alex Gordon for the introduction to Anna (Yvala) Sten, which has led to her husband, Eugene Frenke, suggesting that he and I should put our heads together and package something big in the way of a sci-fi film as soon as he's thru producing the Mitchum movie that John Huston's directing for him. Hope you find something suitable among my suggestions, Bob Stabler and Jeff Brown. And blank-

et thanks, John Barrymore Jr, Thad Swift, Martin Varno, Paul Robbins, Bill Nolan, Glen Vernon, Graham Stone, Bill Rogers, Bruce Suhke, Maria Hrnec, Rainer Eisfeld and WC Brandt for various kindnesses to this column and columnist.

—*Forrest J Ackerman*

SCIENTIFILM MARQUEE is a regular feature. Columnist Ackerman may be contacted via the Beverly Hills, Calif., telephone exchange by interested contributors.



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MACHINE SHOP EMPLOYEE

R. Arbogast: Gen. Del., Glendale, Calif.

Age 27: "I'm single, five-ten, and am a machinist. I'm interested in contacting others who are interested in ESP, psychology, psionics, hypnotism, mnemonics, and physics. I'd also like to add that perhaps someone can put me in touch with the Gravity Research Foundation."

STUDENT

John W. Thiel: 2934 Wilshire St., Markham, Ill.

Age 12: "I belong to five science fiction fan clubs and publish a fan magazine of my own, *Caveat Emperor*. I'm interested in writing and proudly possess a certificate of merit from the 1955 Boy's Life contest. Would like to hear from others in the field and in closing, my favorite artists in the field are

Virgil Finlay and Hannes Bok, and authors, Heinlein, Burroughs, and Eric Frank Russell."

S-F ASSOCIATION

Allan Howard: 101 Fairmount Ave., Newark 7, N.J.

Age 43: "I'm married, and have read science fiction since 1927. While I'll write to anyone, I'd like to invite correspondents for our club, the Eastern Science Fiction Association. We have an adult group meeting the 1st Sunday of each month here in Newark. We'd be happy to hear from fans anywhere in the world."

STUDENT

Robert Collins: 75 Governors Ave., Medford 55, Mass.

Age 13: "I enjoy all types of science fiction, especially that dealing with the field of psi powers.

Like chess, football, basketball -- and girls! Would appreciate letters from anybody, anywhere."

AMATEUR CRITIC

James W. Ayers: 609 First St., Attalla, Ala.

Age 28: "I'm single, and quite interested in science fiction and fantasy. I'd like to correspond with anyone interested in trading, writing or selling (what they write). With regard to the latter, I'd like to exchange ideas on manuscript technique."

STUDENT

Edward Jazdzewski: 2831 S. Herman St., Milwaukee 7, Wisc.

Age 15: "I am a science fiction fan and plan to become an s-f writer on leaving school. I'm extremely interested in ESP and would like to begin a series of experiments across the nation -- or the world, for that matter. Anyone similarly interested, please write me. Also, those interested in writing, purpose to exchange ideas and perhaps work up collaborative efforts."

SERVICEMAN

Monte A. Triplett: 3rd Division, DD643, USS Sigourney, % FPO, New York, N.Y.

Age 19: "I'm 5' 11", straw hair, blue eyes, single and poor! I indulge in all sorts of hobbies -- coins, stamps, etc. I'm also a bug for Hi-fi, astronomy and related sciences. I am quite interested in hearing from others with mutual interests."

GOLD PROSPECTOR

Peter Marocco: 209 S. Colorado St., Butte, Mont.

Age 32: "I've been reading science fiction for as long as I can remember. I also collect stamps, and reside here on the richest hill on Earth -- where I am a gold prospector. Will enjoy hearing from anyone."

TEENAGE MISS

Sammi Kinyon: 940 N.-8th St., Spearfish, S.D.

Age 15: "I'm a fifteen year old girl who likes writing, painting, and sports of all kinds. I like music -- from classical to rock 'n roll, and love to write letters. (Maybe someday if the source of the Flying Saucers is Mars I'll have a Martian for a pen-pal!) In the meantime will appreciate hearing from terrestrial teenagers."

MUSIC GRADUATE

Frank Cerbasi: 522 36th St., Union City, N.J.

Age 27: "While I am fond of science fiction as a hobby, my profession is music, composing and teaching. I'm a Conservatory of Music graduate where I majored in theory and composition. I would like to correspond with men and women with similar interests."

GREENSKEEPER

Zeus de Mello: 1492 Sonoma Ave., Albany 6, Calif.

Age 19: "While my job is a greenskeeper at a golf course, I

confess I don't dig the game! My interests run to science fiction fan magazines and experimental prose in s-f. Would like to hear from those who dig the latter two!"

STUDENT

Bill Cote: 706 Homewild, Jackson, Michigan.

Age 16: "I'm a student and would like to correspond with guys and gals interested in science fiction, astronautics, mental telepathy -- or flying saucers!"

STUDENT

Ross Venticek: 983 Carling Ave., Ottawa 3, Ont., Canada.

Age 23: "I am currently combining my student status with work in an institution for children here in Ottawa. I would like to hear from other fans in the science fiction world."

STUDENT

Edward Gorman, Jr.: 119 1st Ave., SW, Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

Age 14: "My interests include jazz, rhythm and blues, s-f, and writing; like to collect old mags which is an interesting but costly hobby! In particular would like to hear from gals with above interests."

NIGHT-SHIFT WORKER

Eileen Hines: 65 Franklin St., Valparaiso, Indiana.

Age 39: "I'm a widow, working

the night shift in a local factory. Read every science fiction magazine I can obtain; am trying to write short stories and would like to hear from anyone -- male or female in my age bracket."

INSTRUMENTMAN

Robert V. Hill, IM-1: R-S Div., USS Tidewater, AD-31, % FPO, New York, N.Y.

Age 27: "I'm an instrumentman -- watch-maker -- by trade. I'm interested in the study of telepathy and anything dealing with the mind. Have formed one sf club and would like to get another going by mail."

MEDICAL STUDENT

H. Frederick Koch: 3708 Dewey Ave., Omaha 5, Nebr.

Age 21: "I'm a freshman medical student; been reading science fiction for about ten years. Started with Edgar Rice Burroughs. Now think Wyndham and Bradbury are tops. Will enjoy hearing from others."

STUDENT

Glenn King, Jr.: 9 E. Main St., Wappinger Falls, N.Y.

Age 14: "I'm a Dodger and Elvis Presley fan (but I do not wear a duck's tail or motorcycle boots!). My hobbies are drawing, writing fantasy and science fiction, astronomy, rocketry, zoology, and paleozoology. I'm handsome, intelligent, charming -- and, as you can plainly see, modest. I'd like to hear from pretty girls and foreign fans."

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Letters from the Readers

COVER MASTERPIECE

Dear Bill Hamling:

Well, once again I write a letter of praise. The January issue of TALES was a collection of science fiction stories to be treasured—with the one exception of the story by Silverberg, THE NUDES OF QUENDAR III: (I could have done better myself!)

I would have bought the issue for the cover alone. Wow! That was a masterpiece of science fiction artwork. By all means let's have more covers by Malcolm Smith.

Seems that for about every 6 or 7 stories you print, a dud crops up. Well, at that rate I won't mind much, so here's my subscription for the next 12 issues.

Hope a few Dwight V. Swain novels will be forthcoming also.

Bill Desmond
787 E. Fourth St.
South Boston 27, Mass.

Wait until you see the Malcolm Smith cover on the forthcoming July

issue. It's really a honey! Swain you've got this month—and you'll be seeing him again soon too. We aim to please! —Glad to have you aboard the subscription list. For those of you who have not as yet subscribed, we'd like to call to your attention the terrific NEW book bonus-subscription on page 130. The Van Vogt EMPIRE OF THE AT-OM book is a brand-new book, just going on sale in the book stores throughout the country. It's yours, FREE, with a TALES subscription. (Or an IMAGINATION sub.) Never in science fiction history has a brand-new book been offered free simultaneously with its appearance on the retail shelves. We've made a fantastic deal with the book publisher — so go ahead and take advantage while you can. Supplies for our readers are limited, so first come, first served! — And if you haven't got the Heinlein book REVOLT IN 2100 you can have that free too. Adding in the Fredric Brown & Mack Reynolds anthology, SCIENCE FICTION CARNIVAL,

you've got a combination impossible to beat. Get that sub in today!.. wlh

NEW READER CHECKS IN

Dear Bill Hamling:

I have just finished reading the January issue of TALES and would like to say a few things about it. (So the column needs letters!) Actually, I just started reading TALES, with the November issue, and so far I have nothing bad to say about the magazine. I especially like the way you mention the number of words for each story on the contents page — very informative.

The cover for January was great! I'd hate to meet one of those machines in a dark alley — even less in the "crater" in which Hammill stands surrounded! S.M. Tenneshaw did extremely well with the cover story, THE ULTIMATE WEAPON, and you did well too in publishing it.

I might say that Darius John Granger slacked off with his THE ENEMY WITHIN, but I'm not too critical about it. And I'd like to add that Randall Garrett's "defense" is good enough for me, as in his THE STAR SLAVERS.

I'll be reading the next issue!

Wayne Roberts
1725 Jennifer
Houston 29, Texas

Welcome aboard, Wayne. Glad you liked the Smith cover so well. Smitty, as you may not know since you're new to our pages, is ranked as one of the greatest "machine" artists in science fiction. You'll be seeing a lot more of his work shortly. Ditto Tenneshaw wlh

WRONG GUESS ON COVER

Dear Bill:

I really enjoyed the January issue of TALES, but after I read it I started wondering about the cover. Don't misunderstand me, it is really a great painting, but what is the connection between it and THE ULTIMATE WEAPON ...? I rated the story number 1 in the issue but as I understood it the "Ultimate Weapon" was the "hsrorn" — a tiny bead that glistened brilliantly at the throat of each of the Rhodanas. On the cover Malcolm Smith has the ultimate weapon depicted as a sort of spherical robot with many limbs and an invisible force field around it. All I can figure out is that the cover is not meant to illustrate what the average person would associate with the title. As such I truly do not believe Smith did justice to Tenneshaw's story. I hope that coming issues will have covers illustrating the story correctly.

Otherwise, you've got a winning combo for January. I rated the yarns as follows:

1. THE ULTIMATE WEAPON
2. THE MENTALLER
3. THE ENEMY WITHIN
4. LAST SHIP OUT
5. THE STAR SLAVERS
6. THE NUDES OF QUENDAR

III

7. WEDNESDAY MORNING SERMON

The latter ran a poor seventh to the other stories.

I like your letter column and cartoons. So keep up the good work and you'll keep getting my 35c until

I decide to send in \$3 for a sub to save myself a trip to the newsstand!

David P. Sparks
669 Lynn St.
Louisville 17, Ky.

Malcolm Smith's cover was not intended to illustrate the title to the feature novel, rather his cover was suggested by a scene in the story. Our covers are always painted either as an actual scene from the story, or one suggested for dramatic possibilities. So you guessed wrong about our policy being one of illustrating a title. Important thing is you liked the cover. Say, stop running to the newsstand and mail in your three bux! — And have your pick of the terrific book selection on page 130. Okay? wlh

FREE BOOK HIS MEAT!

Dear Bill:

Just finished the January issue of TALES and my opinions are as follows:

Cover: Very nice. It's good to see Malcolm Smith's work again.

THE ULTIMATE WEAPON by S.M. Tenneshaw: fair but much too short. Let's have our novels be at least sixty pages long. By the way, when can we expect more novels by Alex Blade and Ed Hamilton?

THE ENEMY WITHIN and LAST SHIP OUT were interesting. Best of the short stories, however, was THE STAR SLAVERS by Randall Garrett.

Incidentally, I recently received my free book selection for my subscription and am genuinely pleased with it. In fact, "I can't for the life of me see how any stf fan can

pass it up. I'm glad I didn't!"
Bruce Taylor
168 Alling St.
Kensington, Conn.

Lead novel this issue runs through page 65. No sooner said than done! Blade and Hamilton coming up... we agree, no science fiction reader should pass up the big bonus subscription to TALES or IMAGINATION. Come on, gang, fill out your stf library! wlh

GLUM REPORT

Dear Bill Hamling:

January issue of TALES has a very fine cover in the old tradition. But the lead novel is lousy space opera, diluted Williamson and E.E. Smith. Strictly for the kiddies.

THE MENTALLER has some good points, primitive plotting, however, THE ENEMY WITHIN, readable. THE STAR SLAVERS, another of your regular low points. Every line exudes the essence of triteness. I have rarely read anything quite as ridiculous. LAST SHIP OUT is readable, has some good points. WEDNESDAY MORNING SERMON, good, has some sting to it. Best item in the issue. THE NUDES OF QUENDAR III — surprise, surprise! But I've read something much like it before.

Features make the mag worth getting. Cartoons: disregarding the females and the hairy monster, average. Letters were the funniest thing in the ish. All the common types, with comments to match.

In all, an issue on the average low level. Better next time?

Dainis Bisenieks

303 Hinsdale H., E. Q.
Ann Arbor, Mich.
We think so — every timewlh

THE ANSWER IS: YES!

Dear Mr. Hamling:

Although I'm just getting started as an stf fan, I know that the January issue of TALES was the greatest. Are all your issues as good?

If so, I'll send in my subscription soon. — I especially enjoyed THE ENEMY WITHIN.

George Wells
River Avenue
Box 486
Riverhead, N.Y.

We'll be looking for that sub, George. That should answer your questionwlh

NO WASTED DOUGH!

Dear Bill Hamling:

I am a 15 year old sophomore and I've never been interested in science fiction until recently when I was browsing around the local news-

stand and spotted your January issue of TALES. I bought it — thinking I'd wasted some money. Now I've scratched together the price of a subscription! Guess you're making an stf fan out of me!

James Bacilek
606 Loves Park
Loves Park, Ill.

We've been making stf fans out of quite a host of guys and gals these days, Jim. And it makes us quite happy. Science fiction is a wonderful field of literature, and the best entertainment the printed word can offer. In TALES and IMAGINATION we try to present the best of the best!..In closing for this month we'd like to call your attention once again to the new book bonus for your subscription on page 130 — next page. Remember that the Van Vogt book has just been published and is yours absolutely free with a 12 issue sub. — But why not really get yourself a bargain and subscribe for 36 issues, getting all 3 books for your library...All for now, see you next issue with the great new Edmond Hamilton novel...wlh

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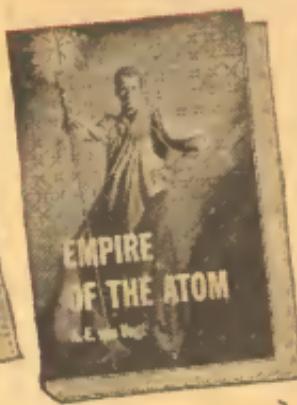
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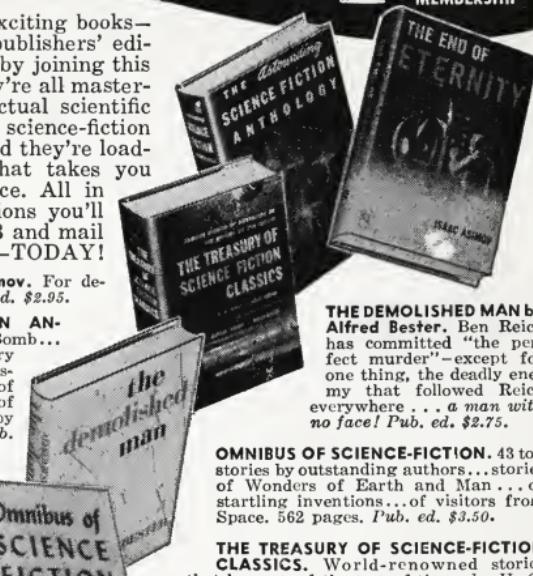
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